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The Police Special's Dilemma.



OR,
Gus Wayland's Best Bower.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "STEVE STARR, THE DOCK,
DETECTIVE," "PLUNGER PETE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAIF AND THE RESCUER.

It was a rough part of the "East Side" of New York, and a place where people were not always safe at night. Years before the name of "Black Block" had been bestowed upon the stretch of houses that reached between the cross-streets, and the apt name re-

"FOR THE LAST TIME," CRIED GUS, THE HIGH ROLLER, "GET OUT OF MY WAY."

mained almost as appropriate as ever despite the efforts made to purify the neighborhood.

The evening was well advanced when a young woman came along this block. She was neatly dressed, and moved with the quick air that respectable women assume when abroad alone at a late hour. But few persons were in sight, and she seemed safe enough, although there was no absolute safety for anybody at that hour in that section of the great city.

From an intersecting alley two men suddenly appeared. Their cover had been perfect, and there was no reason to suspect their presence until they abruptly stepped out in her path.

"Hold up, my pretty one," exclaimed the foremost. "We want a word with you."

She looked quickly, and seeing that they were evil of face and odorous of whisky, she tried to pass quickly, her color changing with the fear that came to her.

He who had spoken seized her arm and held fast, while a wheezy laugh escaped his lips.

"Not so fast, beauty! Linger with us; we know a good thing when we see it, an' we've got it in our peeps now. Give us a kiss, and then we will talk things over."

She tried to release her arm, but the effort failed.

"Let me go," she implored, tremulously.

"You shall go—with us! We like your style. Now, be sensible, for it won't do you no good ter kick. Come here!"

Her efforts had kept her at a distance thus far, but he now gave a pull and drew her close to his side. He was a wanderer of the night, homeless, and bent only on evil, and it did him good to act the ruffian. An outcast of society, he still had eyes in his head, and had seen that she was pretty. He knew not what the night might bring him later, but was determined to touch her lips with his own, caring little if the contact was contamination to her.

He bent his head. She cried out feebly:

"Help! help!"

"Ha! ha! The help won't come, my daisy! Here we go—"

"Stop!"

It was a stern, commanding voice, near at hand, and the second man did what he should have done before—gave heed to something more than his companion's molestation of the girl.

"Look out!" he cried.

The foremost knave stopped short and raised his head. He saw a tall man nearing them with long strides. It was a man of singularly impressive appearance, too, and one not unknown to them.

"The Royal Flush!" muttered the checked thug.

"Git!"

Thus advised the second rough, and the advice was promptly taken. Ugly and heedless though they were, they would not have hesitated to delay and fight if the newcomer had been a patrolman, for they had done such a thing more than once; but something about the man who had thus appeared was too much for their courage or their ambition. Both men turned and plunged into the alley; their steps sounded for a moment, and then they were gone.

The girl was reeling with the sickening fright which had come upon her, and she might have fallen had not the rescuer been in good time. He caught her; he gave her the help of his strong arms; he bent over her with anxious solicitude which amounted almost to tenderness.

She did not answer, but her weight was upon his arm, and he saw that she was overwhelmed by her adventure. How quickly she would recover was not certain, but he was not at a loss regarding his proper course, as some men, differently situated, would have been.

"Lean upon me," he directed, with the same air of pitying tenderness which seemed common to him. "I will take you to a place of safety."

Possibly she heard him, possibly she did not, but when he moved, his firm, friendly hold was still on her, and, in some way, her feet kept time with his.

Down Black Block they went in this fashion. They had few observers. One dirty-faced urchin, noticing them, and detecting her uncertain step, advanced the opinion for his own edification that she was intoxicated. She was not, but if she had been, it would not have been an uncommon sight for Black Block.

The few feeble lights of the street glimmered dimly upon them, and the walk seemed doleful enough, but they were near a better haven. Branded as the vicinity was, it had its redeeming feature.

The guide reached a door which, contrary to the custom, was wide open. Looking into the doorway, she could see ample light, and a sort of mute hospitality which could not but appeal to the wanderer of the night, be he or she good or bad; it bespoke comfort.

Through this open door went the man, taking the girl with him. He entered a spacious hall—not the grand hall of newer New York, but one wide for Black Block—and they were there met by a lady whose hair was gray and whose face was the personification of goodness and gentle, yet business-like energy.

"Another, Mr. Dix?" she murmured.

"A needy fellow-being; I know not whom. She seems to be faint; pray take her to the women's quarters and care for her."

The waif lifted her head.

"I shall be well presently!" she whispered.

"And all the sooner if you have due care. This lady will see to you kindly—"

"I prefer to remain with you."

"But you need care—"

"Only a drink of water and rest. Let me sit down; let me drink, and I shall soon be myself."

Both had been looking at her closely. Now they looked at each other. There was a mute question on the one part, and a mute answer on the other. She was to have her own way, for they had seen that she was not like those usually seen on Black Block.

Quietly she was conducted to a smaller, office-like room, and given a chair. She no longer exhibited great absence of strength, and looked around with wondering eyes. She looked, too, at her companions.

The gray-haired lady was remarkable only in that she wore a black dress, white apron, and white cap that smacked of some sort of official occupation. It was different with the man.

He was a trifle past forty years of age. In height he was little less than six feet, and this altitude was increased in appearance by the fact that he wore a Prince Albert coat and was far from broad-shouldered. Anybody would have pronounced him slender of build, but closer scrutiny would have shown a well-developed chest, and that his arms were so well rounded as to give the impression of at least average strength.

His clothes were black from head to foot, and the severity of their style suggested that he was a minister, though this was not the fact.

His face was smooth shaven and long, his eyes large and dark, and his hair black as his clothes. An impressive-looking man was he who had been addressed as Mr. Dix.

He brought the newcomer a glass of water. She drank and was refreshed. Then she looked around the room in manifest curiosity.

"This is not like a house," she murmured. "I do not understand where I am."

"Do you live near here?" asked the elderly lady.

"On the next block."

"Then have you never heard of the mission?"

"The mission? Ah, yes, I have heard of it. Is this the place?"

"Yes. I am Mrs. Ayre; this is Mr. Rockingham Dix, a missionary attached to the place."

"I was brought here—here! It is—it is a refuge for—"

"All who need aid," mildly interrupted Rockingham Dix. "Our specialty is chil-

dren who require help, but we turn nobody away. It is what we advertise it—a refuge. Here the poor and needy are always welcome."

There was a trace of uneasiness on the face of the girl, but it vanished after she had again looked at her companions. It would have been strange if those kindly faces had not reassured her. She suddenly brightened up.

"I did not think I should enter a mission to-night. There was no visible reason why I should; I am not especially poor or homeless."

"You are welcome just the same. Temporary need is often more deserving of relief than that which is permanent."

"I was very weak to be affected as I was, but the meeting with those horrible men frightened me."

"Naturally," answered Mr. Dix. "I should not wish to be thus 'held up'—to use the vernacular of the region—myself, and I can judge what it was to you. Your brief alarm was natural, but you need fear nothing more. You can stay here as long as you choose, and when you desire to go home you shall have safe escort."

"If you please, I will go directly. My name is Norma Rayne, and I am stopping, just now—you must know the family I am with, I think. The head of the house is Ezra Pinckney."

"Indeed? Ezra Pinckney, the retired wharfinger?"

"I think that was once his calling."

"I do not know him personally, but he is well known to me by reputation. He has a son whose name is Lloyd, and a brother Zacheus. The brothers did an extensive business as wharfingers at one time, somewhere along the East River."

"I do not know as to that, but you have correctly named the members of the family, though Mr. Zacheus Pinckney does not live with his brother. He has a separate house somewhere."

"Yes. So you live at Ezra Pinckney's?"

"Yes, and no. I am there for the time being; I am a guest."

"We will care for you well, because Mr. Pinckney is a neighbor of ours," added Dix, smiling faintly, "as well as for your own sake."

"I think I am well enough to return home now, and the hour grows late. I was delayed on my return there by an accident on the railroad which stopped us for a while. I think I need not add that the men who accosted me"—Norma paused and shivered—"were total strangers to me. I never saw them before."

"I can readily believe it. This region is not free from evil men."

"Black Block, I have heard it called."

"It is an early name. The place has improved since the name was fastened upon it, but the name sticks, and so does much of the wickedness. Such things won't be uprooted all at once. The mission has been here for a generation, and it has made its mark, however."

Norma had risen, and Rockingham Dix now rose, took up his soft black hat and seemed ready to go with her. They did not start, however. Just then a man pushed his way into the office.

"What about this girl?" he roughly demanded.

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVE'S ACCUSATION.

The whole course of the intruder was surprising and unpleasant. He was not an inmate of the mission, and his entrance was irregular and presuming. More, he was ugly and aggressive of manner, according to the view of the night matron.

Mrs. Ayre did not know him, and he thought she did not like him. He was, however, no stranger to Rockingham Dix, and that gentleman faced him without exhibiting any emotion.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Brown," he returned.

"You know me?" curtly continued the intruder.

"Your name is James Brown—"

"What is my calling?"

The missionary's gaze strayed to Norma for a moment.

"I do not think we need to mention business callings here—"

"I do; I think so!" snapped Mr. Brown. "I am a detective, and I have a word to say in regard to her!"

His finger was pointed at Norma with a vicious jerk. Detective James Brown, commonly known as the "Police Special," did not have an especially bad face, but he had one wherein violent passions and dogged firmness were revealed. Possibly he did not intend to be harsh, but he was so.

Rockingham Dix had been impressed very favorably with Norma, but, though he had believed all she had said, the fact remained that he had no positive knowledge of her. Again his gaze wandered to her, and when he saw that dismay and agitation were pictured there rather than surprise, he withheld the censure he really felt like heaping upon turbulent James Brown.

"We have but limited time," responded Mr. Dix, calmly. "Kindly explain yourself."

"I will. What ghost story has that girl been giving you?"

"Presuming that you use the word in its slang sense, I will say that we have had no 'stories,' and very little talk."

"Do you know she is an old graduate of this very mission?"

"If so it must have been at a date long ago. I do not remember her."

"It was when she was a child."

James Brown's manner continued hostile and unpleasant, and he had so manifestly made the statement to prejudice them against her that Dix now remarked quickly:

"I do not see what that has to do with the case."

"Blood will tell. Once black, always black."

"Mr. Brown, I do not subscribe to your views, nor do I see that the young lady is affected in any way by what you state, even if the assertion be true."

"He seeks to blacken my reputation," added Norma, with spirit. "He would condemn me because he does not like me."

"Why should I?" demanded Brown. "Shall I tell these people what you have done, of late—"

"I have done nothing to my discredit."

"Indeed? What would you call discreditable? Is it nothing to go to an honest man and seek to foist yourself upon him as his child? Mr. Dix, that is just what she has done. Maybe you know my brother, Stephen Brown. He is a well-to-do contractor. He has made money in his business, and that is enough for all of the sharpers in New York to be pouncing upon him. That is what this girl has done—"

"I am no sharper!" she declared, with emphasis.

"Then why try to blackmail him?"

"I have not."

"You claim to be his daughter—"

"Because I think the claim is just and true."

"Nonsense! It is nothing of the sort, and you know it is not—"

"Mr. Brown," interrupted Rockingham Dix, "you will pardon me if I remind you that this is not a court of law. I do not know the case at issue between you and this lady—"

"I repeat that she is a graduate of this mission. She was here as a child. It seems that she does not know who her parents were, but she has been seeking to supply the omission of her elders by making herself out to be the child of my brother. She wishes, in brief, to find a rich father—"

"I care not whether he be rich or poor!" asserted Norma. "I am amply able to make my own way in the world. I never have asked a dollar of Stephen Brown, and I never shall. He deserted me when I was a child, and I do not care for such a supporter. All I ask is a name!"

"You will not get that of Brown."

"I do not think our present companions care to have our private affairs thrust upon them, sir."

"Young lady, you are right in one sense," agreed Mr. Dix. "While I am always ready to help all who require aid, it seems to me that Mr. Brown need not have come here for the threshing of his grain. I do not see what we have to do with it."

"It is because she is here," explained the detective, quickly. "It is because you have taken up with her, and I want you to understand the sort of person who has forced herself upon you—"

"Pardon me, she has not forced herself upon us."

"She is here—"

"By my invitation."

James Brown was silent now. He had heard a plain statement. He knew the reputation of Rockingham Dix, and he dared not even insinuate that there was any crookedness where the honored missionary was concerned. As Mr. Dix was closing up the avenues of attack, the detective appeared to have nothing to say.

Dix was as cool as ever. His marked face was gentle and sympathetic, one would say, and he stood so erect that his tall form seemed to Norma like a rock of safety. She felt—she knew that she would meet with no attack from him. He turned toward her slowly.

"Young lady," he kindly spoke, "there are often baseless rumor and wild guessing done in this life of ours. How much of what I have heard is other than rumor?"

"All is true except the intimations—the charges that my motives are evil."

"Were you once an inmate of this mission?"

"I was, as a child."

"Were you placed here by your parents?"

"Tell him that!" the detective requested with sarcasm.

For the first time the girl showed real resentment. Her eyes glistened and she became firm and energetic.

"I object to this course of procedure!" she declared. "Am I on trial? Am I accused of any crime? If so, is this a court of law? I am not afraid to speak freely to Mr. Dix, but I object to being treated thus by yonder man. If he has any charge to make against me, let him do it in the proper place, and I will answer in the same place. To you, Mr. Dix, I am willing to explain all about myself, but I must decline to do it with this man scoffing and accusing me. This is not a court of law."

"The point is well taken," promptly replied the missionary. "I do not see that we need to pursue this matter, Mr. Brown. If the lady has made a claim against a member of your family, fight it out in court. It will do no good to seek to try this case here. As she says, this is not a court of law."

"I only wished to warn you."

"You have done so."

"I felt it my duty."

"Then you have done your duty."

The detective moved toward the door.

"You can carry on this hob-nob all you see fit," he irritably pursued. "It is nothing to me what is done here, but I thought it best to let you know whom you were befriending. Men who make a business of one thing, as you do, get so they are not practical, and they are easily imposed upon. Now that I have notified you that the girl is a schemer of the worst sort, you can do as you please."

Again he moved, and backed toward the door.

"You have done your duty—as you seem to see it."

Rockingham Dix made the remark with unruffled composure. Parts of Mr. Brown's last speech had not been complimentary to the missionary, but he did not heed the insinuations against his capability and common-sense. No man could do business on Black Block and be thin-skinned.

The Police Special went, though his manner was that of one who hopes to be called back. He was not called, and disappeared through the outer door.

Norma remained with her new acquaintances. She was no longer suffering from

the fright received outside, and her demeanor was calm. She looked closely at both of her companions, however, and seemed to await further conversation with anxiety.

The missionary regarded her attentively and kindly.

"Have you been worried by this man before?" he inquired.

"Never so much as on this occasion, though he has been zealous in helping his brother, and very overbearing and—well, he has abused me before."

"He says you have made a claim on his brother. Is this true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure of the justice of your claim?"

"If I doubted it, sir, I should not have made the claim."

"I do not question your good faith, but is your proof good?"

"I think it is."

"I do not seek to pry into your personal affairs, for I have not the right, but can it be you were once in this institution as an inmate?"

"It is quite true, sir," she replied. "I came here once, and, I am told, twice. By that I mean that when I was here to my own knowledge, I was eight years old, but I have been informed that I was here before that—in my infancy."

"Your name, I believe, is—"

"Norma Rayne."

The missionary glanced at Mrs. Ayre. She understood the look well. The mission kept a record of all who came into their hands, and though such records often told nothing of the past of the inmate, it was often the case that they told much. Mr. Dix did not know whether Norma was aware of this fact, but he desired Mrs. Ayre to occupy the girl's attention for a while until he investigated. He wished to see the old entry without letting Norma know he was to consult it.

The matron took up the conversation; the missionary excused himself plausibly and then went to the next room. There he took down a well-worn book, such as they used in their record-making. It was an index, but he paused in the task and fixed his gaze on vacancy.

"It is strange," he murmured, "but she reminds me of—but why do I let my mind run on the past?"

With steady hands he turned to the letter "R" in the list. He quickly found the name, and then sought the appropriate book indicated by the index.

"This may solve the whole question," he murmured.

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT TRAGEDY.

Twenty years ago the record had been made. The lady bookkeeper of that period had long since been called to her final home, but Rockingham Dix had remained in the mission and risen to the foremost place among the active workers. He sighed as he remembered the owner of the hand that had traced the lines, but quickly centered his attention on the entry.

"Norma Rayne, female; aged about one week; nationality, American; born in New York; names of parents, John and Ann Rayne; committed by Mrs. Rose Stebbins, only surviving relative."

This, with the date of reception and of discharge, which dates were a little less than a year apart, was all there was. It seemed a most meager entry for the story of a human life, but it was like all others there in its brevity. The inmate might be fortunate in some things, or unfortunate in all, but there was room for no more.

Mr. Dix meditated for a moment, and then called Norma into the room. He had closed the book, and his manner was calm.

"I will go to your home with you directly," he remarked, "but I will ask you to delay a brief time. Are you aware that when we accept a child as a temporary inmate of our home we make record of the fact?"

"Yes," quietly replied the girl.

"Your record is here."

"I am aware of the fact."

"Indeed! How did you learn of it?"

"A copy was made some years ago by a friend of mine."

"The names of your parents are here given as John and Ann Rayne."

"It was done deliberately."

"Further, it says you were committed by Mrs. Rose Stebbins."

"So I have been told."

The girl's manner was quiet and composed as she made these replies, and if she felt any regret that the record told what it did, the fact was not manifest in her looks or speech. On the contrary, she took it with a species of calmness which impressed Mr. Dix still further in her favor.

"Will you allow me to see the entry myself?" she inquired.

"Certainly."

She read it through quietly, but sighed as she finished.

"It was a poor way to begin the world," she murmured, "but it was not my fault. Mr. Dix, now that you have become by chance a confidant of part of my story, I shall be glad to tell you the whole, but this is not the hour to do it. If you will call on me at Mr. Pinckney's, at any time, I shall be glad to see you."

"I will very willingly do so. Your reference to the hour is timely, and, with your permission, I will now see you safely home."

"I shall not decline, for my late experience has frightened me."

The missionary resumed his hat and they passed out of the house. It was not far to the plain, old-fashioned home of her present host, and they were soon there. Mr. Dix saw her inside the door and then walked back to the mission. He went in a thoughtful frame of mind.

On his way he was seen by persons of various grades of life, and some of them were as evil as the men who had attacked Norma, but, despite the lateness of the hour, he was not molested. It was a rare thing for anybody to trouble him. He was well known, and even the worst of the denizens of the ward kept their hands off.

It was his would-be detractors, rather than his friends, who knew him to be resolute and forceful when occasion required, and they had paid a tribute to him in their rude way. They called him the "Royal Flush of Black Block," and though the term had a suggestion that was not pleasant to Mr. Dix, it stuck to him.

It meant that he was, to use still further the vernacular of the region, a "trump card."

Reaching the mission on this occasion, he first saw to some necessary duties, and then retired to his own little room. He had good nerves and good health, and soon fell asleep.

Some hours passed, and then he was aroused.

"Shouts in the street!" he exclaimed. "Is it anything of importance, or only a drunken man making himself obnoxious?"

Rising fully, he went to the window. This done, he was not long in arousing fully. Shouts came clearly to his ears.

"Fire! Fire!"

Quickly the missionary looked up and down the street.

"A house wrapped in flames and burning furiously!" he cried.

He ran back, hurriedly threw on his clothes, and was soon on the street and hurrying forward.

"Can it be Ambrose Temple's house?" he thought, looking ahead as he went. "No, it is still further—what? It is Ezra Pinckney's!"

He grew excited. It was to that house, only a few hours before, that he had conducted Norma Rayne. The interest the girl had inspired in his mind now acted quite as strong as his interest in a neighbor. He hastened his rapid run and dashed up.

A few people were collected around the front of the burning house. No firemen had yet arrived.

"Is the family out?" asked Mr. Dix, first.

"I guess so," replied a seedy man.

"Have you been in?"

"The door is locked, and we can't get in."

"Do you mean to say you have let that stop you when a fire was in progress? Why, unless the people have escaped they may be suffocating. Follow me in!"

The missionary sprang forward and dashed his whole weight against the door. It flew back, and then smoke poured out freely.

The heat made Mr. Dix recoil for a moment, but he was soon himself.

"Follow me!" he again directed.

"Parson, I wouldn't do it," advised a rough-looking man. "It means sure death. That's a regular furnace."

"Will you see the helpless ones inside die unaided? Come, that is not like us of this vicinity—we are not cowards."

"No, nor fools!" was the blunt answer.

"Must I go alone?"

The appeal worked, and two men placed themselves by Mr. Dix's side. The start was made, and the three pressed forward at a run. The smoke was terribly thick and oppressive, and it attacked their eyes and lungs at once, but worse was before them. In his zeal the missionary had not looked carefully, but he now saw what he was to meet.

The stairway was a mere sheet of fire, and, as the brave men entered the area, they caught the heat full in their faces. It was more than human nerves could dare—the two aids turned and ran, and even Mr. Dix had to admit defeat. He fell back to the door.

"No one can pass there," he murmured, regretfully.

"Sure death, parson."

"Who has been here longest?" continued the missionary.

"Guess I have," replied a bystander.

"Have you seen nobody come out?"

"Not a soul."

"Merciful Providence! Must they die there? Cannot we find some way in? The back yard!—can it be reached?"

"I reckon the fire is hottest there!"

"I fear you are right. This is terrible! Must precious lives go out thus?"

"Look! Look!"

A man at the rear of the crowd was pointing up, and all followed the direction of his finger. What they saw next chilled them through.

Inside the house, back of the closed window just above them, and where the smoke could not dull the power of the red flames, a man was standing and looking out. Mr. Dix thought he recognized him at once. For years he had been accustomed to see Ezra Pinckney, the owner of the house, and he believed he knew him now. Pinckney was by the window, with the fire and smoke all around him, and with death quite as near.

He was motionless, appearing to be dazed.

"Jump!"

"Break the window!"

"Save yourself!"

These and other shouts went out, but they were sounded in vain. Suddenly the old gentleman receded as if falling, and then there was nobody to be seen in the window.

Almost all of the observers were rough men, but a murmur of dismay and something near to mental anguish rose from them. They knew what that disappearance meant, they thought—they could not hope Ezra Pinckney had escaped the awful peril of the hour.

Almost before they could express their feelings there was a clangor of bells and the rush of feet, and a fire engine came rushing toward the spot. Most of the previous spectators hailed its coming with a faint cheer, and then they had something to fix their attention on.

Other paraphernalia of the fire department followed the first arrival, and, with several carriages on the spot, the gallant firemen got down to work rapidly.

Rockingham Dix aided in all they did, and was as good a worker as the best of them.

Quickly several streams of water were leveled at the fire, and its period of continuance was seen to be limited.

Just then Mr. Dix could not do anything practical, so he fell back out of the way. Thus it was that he suddenly found himself facing two ladies. The encounter surprised him—one was Norma Rayne.

He rushed to her side.

"You are safe, safe?" he cried.

The girl shrank back, seeming to be dazed and frightened.

"The other inmates of the house?" the missionary cried. "Mr. Pinckney and his son—where are they?"

"We know nothing of them!"

It was not Norma who answered, but her female companion, and the calm and business-like tone jarred on Mr. Dix's nerves. He looked at her as closely as the sheet of encircling smoke would allow, and saw that she was nearly twice Norma's age, and thin of face and figure.

"I fear Mr. Pinckney has perished," he added.

"Mercy!" gasped Norma.

"Have you not seen Lloyd Pinckney?" persisted the missionary.

"We have not," calmly responded the second lady.

"When did you leave the house?"

"That is our business!"

Mr. Dix stopped short in his questioning. Not until then did he suppose there was any danger of a rebuff; as indifferent as the tone of the unknown appeared, he had not looked for actual unconcern on her part, much less for such a reply.

"I did not intend to give offense," he finally found speech to answer.

"You have not," assured Norma. "Mr. Dix; this is Hermione Legrand, my friend."

"We meet at a sorrowful time," replied the missionary. "I can hardly exchange the customary greetings now. Ladies, do you know how the fire started?"

"We know nothing about it," quickly returned Miss Legrand. "We are not posing as a fire department. I dare say it was a matter of a servant's carelessness, but we left the house as soon as it began, and did not stop to ask."

"Did you give an alarm?"

"Really, sir, you are too inquisitive," snapped Hermione. "We are not being cross-examined, and we have nothing more to say. It is sufficient that we have lost our clothing—it is a shame."

Rockingham Dix was accustomed to being snubbed in his daily work, but he did not now feel the rebuff as much as he did the tone of this Miss Legrand. It jarred more and more on his nerves, and he felt surprise that Norma should have such a friend.

Just then a murmur rose from the crowd and the missionary stopped a man who was rushing away.

"Have the firemen made an entrance?" asked Mr. Dix.

"Yes, and they have found one body already."

"A body? Whose is it?"

"Let me answer that question."

It was a new voice, and Mr. Dix turned and saw Detective James Brown. The latter seemed to be more grim and threatening of face than ever, and he swept ominous glances from Mr. Dix to the two ladies.

"I will tell you who has been found dead," he added, in a low, strange voice. "It is Ezra Pinckney!"

"Poor Pinckney!" murmured Mr. Dix.

"Poor Pinckney, indeed! He deserves the term, for he did not die by fire," replied the detective.

"How, then, did he die?"

"By foul play!—murdered! He lies dead with a knife in his heart. Yes, murder has been done," swiftly added the detective, "and now," he pursued, vehemently, "we want to know what these women know about it. Doubtless all the other inmates of the house are dead, but these two are here, calm and cool. What do they know of the murderer?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DARK FINGER OF SUSPICION.
There could be no doubt as to the detective's meaning. If his words had lacked suggestiveness the rest would have been found in his looks and manner, and Rockingham Dix experienced a chill. It flashed upon him that his own recent efforts to get enlightenment from the ladies had failed, and what had seemed strange to him, then, in their conduct, was more striking now.

James Brown had aimed to make an impression, and he succeeded. Norma recoiled.

"Mr. Pinckney murdered!" she gasped.

"Stabbed in cowardly style," added the detective.

"Merciful Heaven!"

"Do not blame Heaven for sins of the flesh. What do you know of it, I say?"

"We know nothing," snapped Hermione Legrand. "Why should we? It is nothing to us—"

"You may find it is much," retorted Brown, warmly. "All but you two have died in the house, but you are here, fully dressed and as cool as if nothing had happened. What do you know about the murderer?"

"Do you mean to insinuate—"

Hermione began to question with warmth equal to his own, but he sharply interrupted:

"I give it as my opinion that you killed Ezra Pinckney."

There was a gasp from Norma, who seemed about to fall to the ground under the weight of emotion, and for once the agile tongue of the elder woman was stilled. The blunt declaration was too much for even her ready assurance. It was Rockingham Dix who broke the brief pause which followed, and his voice was stern as he demanded:

"What are your grounds of proof?"

"Proof remains to be had," admitted the Police Special.

"And do you make the charge on mere suspicion?"

"I make no charges. I simply gave my opinion. I shall try to back it up with proof."

"Man, you have done very wrong if you have said this without a grain of evidence—"

"I am not so destitute of evidence as you may think. I happen to know that the women quarreled with Ezra Pinckney this very night."

"Quarreled?" repeated Norma, huskily.

"Yes, that is it. Pinckney took you two in and gave you a home. It was a great error on his part, since he knew nothing of you, and he has paid dear for his mistake."

"I deny that there was a quarrel," asserted Norma.

"I can prove it."

"By whom?" demanded Mr. Dix.

"That I will tell in due time. Let it suffice for now that they quarreled with the old man to-night. Now comes this killing. What do you think of it, Dix?"

"Simply that you are being guided by your own unreasoning prejudice."

"You are welcome to your opinion. I have a right to mine. We will see who hits nearer the mark."

Mr. Brown stalked off in indignation, and Norma was about to utter some excited speech, when there was another murmur from the crowd.

"Lloyd Pinckney!"

Rockingham Dix turned quickly toward the house. Lloyd was the son of Ezra Pinckney, and the man most concerned in the tragedy that had taken place. His appearance showed that he had not been also a victim of the flames, and one weight was removed from the missionary's heart.

For the time he forgot the drama that had been enacted by his side, and pressed forward nearer the burning house. He was eager to see and question the newcomer.

Lloyd Pinckney was a fine-looking, athletic young fellow, and he made a good appearance now, his grief—manly, sincere and pathetic—was too genuine to admit of doubt. He believed he was looking on the body of his father, and he was crushed for the time.

The missionary stood by with the rest. The fire was fast giving way to the efforts of the brigade, and there was nothing for the onlookers to do. Mr. Dix waited what seemed to be to him an appropriate period, and then pressed forward to Lloyd's side.

He laid a hand kindly on the young man's shoulder.

"I am sorry for you in this, Lloyd," he spoke, gently.

The younger man looked up, his lips quivered, but he speedily regained a degree of composure.

"You are a stranger to me, Mr. Dix, except by reputation, but I am sure of all you say."

"You have lost a good father."

Lloyd's lips quivered, and he was silent.

"In an hour like this," pursued the missionary, "mere words are weak. My aid is open to you if anything is needed. I shall be glad to help you."

"I will not forget it; but I know of nothing to be done."

"Is there nothing to be done when your father has been murdered?" demanded a bystander, gruffly.

"We spoke of other, more filial duties and filial griefs," replied Mr. Dix.

"The man recalls a part of this horrible affair," added Lloyd, his manner changing. "My father is slain—foully murdered. Then there is work for me to do—the work of justice. The slayer shall be found. Here, by the body of my good parent, I swear this! I swear to avenge his death and bring the murderer to justice."

"I cannot say you will do ill," replied Mr. Dix.

"But where is the clew? Who is the murderer? Who would kill one who had no enemy?"

"Do you know," asked an officious citizen, "that comments have been made on the fact that no alarm was given until the house was far gone, yet the two women have been seen here, safe, calm, fully clothed, and without a mark of smoke? Do you know people say that is strange?"

"I am not deaf," answered Lloyd, almost resentfully. "I have heard these insinuations, but I give them no heed."

"Maybe you know where the women were all that while?"

"No."

"The servant says there was a quarrel."

"She probably lies."

"Permit me to tell my story."

A gentle voice made this request, and all eyes became fixed on the speaker. Many there knew him, and some knew him very well. His mild interruption was too commonplace thus far to arouse much interest, but Rockingham Dix seemed inclined to give him full opportunity to go on. He was, in fact, Mr. Dix's right-hand man in mission affairs, and he had the confidence of his superior.

"What, do you know anything about it, Jones?" inquired the missionary.

"Possibly I do, though I assert nothing."

Mr. Jones Laken folded his hands across his stomach, and stood straight, solemn and statue-like.

"Let us hear it," directed Mr. Dix, hoping for something which would offset the damaging statements of other witnesses.

"I saw Ezra Pinckney this evening," explained Jones, with an air of deep melancholy, "and he told me he was going to send the two women away from his house. His exact words were that he had learned enough to 'send them packing.'"

This evidence created fresh sensation, and the glances of the crowd told that the majority of them believed that it strengthened the charges against Norma and Hermione vastly. Lloyd Pinckney was not of this majority. He took two long steps and gained Jones Laken's side. His face was white and angry, and he seemed tempted to attack the assistant missionary then and there.

"I believe you lie!" cried the young man.

It was a speech which rarely passed in Black Block without a fight, but Jones Laken did not seem moved by resentment.

"It is too true, young sir."

"My father said that—my father?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, he liked Miss Rayne almost as if she was his daughter."

"I know not how that was, sir."

"They were holding a friendly conversation only this evening—and now you tell such a thing. Are you deaf?"

"No, sir."

"You misunderstood my father."

"No, sir; I am sorry, but I understood him plainly."

"I believe you lie!" declared Lloyd.

"Pardon me," mildly interrupted Rockingham Dix, "but Mr. Laken surely would not do that. I know him well—"

"I begin to know him myself!" exclaimed Lloyd.

"I am not to blame for what was told me," replied Jones. "I can only say that Mr. Ezra Pinckney was very angry on account of the ladies, and that he declared he would send them packing, just as I stated."

"Again I say that I believe you lie!" sharply retorted Lloyd. "By making such charges you defame my father and the ladies alike. It is infamous, and I—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Pinckney, but let us not talk of this more now. Let us remember only the dreadful occurrences and the duties of the hour."

Rockingham Dix spoke with his quiet air of strength, which never failed to make impression.

It was oil on the troubled waters, and Lloyd, with his great bereavement thus brought to his mind, again changed manner at once. His face softened and his lips trembled.

"I have something else to think of surely. There is much to think of here."

"I will aid you in all."

"I accept your offer gladly."

Mr. Dix gave his aid with the business precision he had learned from his long experience, and, first of all, asked the crowd to fall back.

"I do not see Miss Rayne and her friend," he remarked.

"I have sent them to my uncle's."

Mr. Dix looked grave. As much as he was impressed in favor of Norma, he thought it would be best for the time for her to find shelter under other than a Pinckney roof, but it was too late to undo the act. He did not mention his disapproval of it.

It was very late when Mr. Dix passed the building for the last time on his way to the mission, but as he went by he was joined by Jones Laken.

"You are losing needed sleep, Jones," remarked Mr. Dix.

"I do not mind it, sir," answered Laken. "I have been helping the worthy firemen. I am not an adept in such matters, but I am always willing to do my best."

"Jones, where did you see Mr. Ezra Pinckney this evening?"

"At his door, sir."

"How did he happen to mention his lady guests?"

"Well, sir, he appeared to be in a mood of irritation, and I suppose, like many of our needy ones in business, he wished to free his mind."

"So he said to you that he had learned enough to send the ladies away, did he?"

"Yes, sir. 'To send them packing' was his own expression."

"Did he give no clew to the nature of his information?"

"None, sir."

"It is odd."

"I trust, sir, that you do not blame me for speaking of it. It did not occur to me how much it reflected on the ladies."

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

The missionary experienced a feeling of annoyance strange to him. He believed fully in Jones Laken, and would not have regarded him as susceptible of reproof, but the new insinuation against the ladies, innocent though he considered it, was not to his liking.

"Possibly it would have been as well to say nothing about it just then, Jones," he responded, "for it was an hour when Detective James Brown had made cer-

tain headlong charges; but there can be no blame attached to you. Of course I would not have you hide anything that the law ought to know, but maybe it will be well for you to keep as still as possible for the time."

Jones had been walking by his superior's side, his manner as mild as ever, and his eyes turned upon Mr. Dix as if seeking both law and Gospel in the will and wisdom of his companion.

"I will heed your admonition, sir."

"My suggestion, Jones."

"Very well, sir."

"See what time will accomplish."

"Yes, sir."

"I can hardly believe ill of the ladies."

"Your sentiments do you honor. Possibly Mr. Pinckney was laboring under some mistake, though he seemed certain and decided."

A cloud passed over the missionary's face.

"We will see about this to-morrow, Jones."

"Of course, sir, you do not blame me for speaking of what Mr. Ezra Pinckney said to me, do you?"

"I have not thought of placing censure upon you," replied the missionary, with barely perceptible evasion.

Arrived at the mission, each man sought his private room for the brief period of time that was left of the night.

Mr. Dix did not give his usual attention, during this time of preparation for slumber, to mission work. He had needy persons to succor, and was not likely to forget it, but his thoughts ran on the events of the night rather than on his poorer friends of the Black Block region.

"It is strange," he murmured, as he rested his head on his pillow, "what a resemblance she bears to my mother. Of course it is but chance, but she interests me on that account."

He fell asleep quickly, and secured a little rest before daybreak. When, the next morning, he went out into the main part of the mission, the bookkeeper met him with the statement:

"A lady is waiting to see you, sir."

Mr. Dix looked surprised. He was an early riser, and, though he had slept longer than usual this morning, he had not expected any one to be ahead of him. He went to the reception room, and when he was there he did not require any introduction to the visitor.

It was Miss Hermione Legrand.

He recognized her more by her figure and outline appearance than in any other way, for she was so closely veiled that he could not have distinguished her face. She rose at his entrance.

"Good-morning," she began. "I trust I have not disturbed you."

"Not at all, Miss Legrand."

"I should not have come had it not been on important business."

"Does it concern—"

The missionary ceased, and she finished for him:

"The events of last night. That is what has brought me here, and I have come in the interests of Norma."

"I hope nothing is wrong."

"Not yet."

"Not yet. Do you anticipate anything seriously wrong?"

"Detective Brown has secured, or will secure, a warrant for her arrest."

Something approaching a frown darkened the missionary's brow.

"On what charge?"

"Murder!"

"The killing of Ezra Pinckney! This is atrocious! What have you done? Speak quickly!"

"I have come to you."

"Why?"

"You must head off this warrant."

"How can I?"

"You are a man of great influence. Even the most noted politician, celebrated as that class is for their influence, cannot move the powers that be as can Rockingham Dix, the great missionary."

Hermione was speaking rapidly, but she was interrupted with both gesture and words.

"You over-estimate my powers, Miss

Legrand. Still, I shall be glad to do what I can for Miss Rayne, if she is innocent, and I doubt not that she is. I do not believe Detective Brown has a warrant for her arrest, or can obtain one, as things are now. He needs more evidence to get the paper."

"You must choke him off now."

"How?"

"Go to him and tell him to keep his hands off. This investigation of his must be stifled while it is young."

"If I asked that of him he would not comply with my wishes."

"Go to his superiors."

"I am sorry, Miss Legrand, but I cannot think of moving in such a way. I cannot stifle inquiry; all I can do is to see that Miss Norma has fair play, and that I will gladly do."

"You must do more. You must stop this where it is!"

"Why should I, if your young friend is innocent?"

The visitor leaned forward suddenly.

"Shall I tell you why?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Because Norma is your own flesh and blood! Because she is your own daughter."

The missionary started plainly, and his color changed, but he did not appear embarrassed or confused.

"What do you expect to gain by making such a statement?" he inquired, resentfully.

"Do you doubt me?"

"More; I know you are either insincere or mistaken. I know it."

"Sir, do you think you know more of this than anybody else?"

"I ought to."

"More than I do?"

"Why should you know anything about it?"

Hermione leaned back in her chair, hesitated for a moment, and then threw back her veil.

"Because," she responded, in a steel-like voice, "I am your wife."

Mr. Dix recoiled. If he had thought her trifling before, the impression seemed to have vanished. His face grew perceptibly pale and his manner agitated. He did not reply, but sat looking at Hermione as if he saw the very earth falling to pieces around him. Surprised, startled, uncertain and excited, he stared blankly at her face.

The pause grew obnoxious to Hermione, and she spoke again.

"I see that you recognize me," she added, with unpleasant accent.

"Effola!" muttered the missionary, dully.

"Effola Jackson Dix that was; Hermione Legrand that is," she amended.

Having reached this point, she clearly expected more from him, but he did not appear gifted with words. That he was deeply dismayed became more and more manifest.

"Well?" she suddenly cried, irritably.

"What?"

"Are you coming to business?"

"What business?" he inquired, like a man in a dream.

"We were speaking of Norma—"

Abruptly Mr. Dix leaned forward.

"Effola, alive!" he muttered.

"Yes, I am alive. What of it?"

"I—I thought you were dead."

"I am not."

"And you are still—"

"Your wife."

Rockingham Dix wiped the unnatural perspiration from his forehead and looked unutterably wretched. He could not deny what had been said, and it was a crushing blow to him. Hermione had been evil and designing in the past, and it was a terrible misfortune to find himself, in the midst of his missionary work, menaced by notoriety in connection with her.

He could not reply to her last assertion, and her patience gave way wholly.

"How long are you going to play the clod?" she demanded. "Will you talk, or shall I talk to somebody else? Will you act the clown or the man?"

The speech served to break the spell. He had not been supine because he was a coward, but for the reason that one in his calling could not have found himself

linked to a worse companion, and all of the ghastly misery of the old life seemed sure to be surpassed, and his good name tarnished. Now, however, he rallied.

"Perhaps I have acted in an unmanly way. Was there not ground for it? I had thought you dead—"

"And hoped I would be a long while dead," flippantly amended the woman.

"Now you appear suddenly, and the surprise is complete."

"What of the pleasure?"

She laughed tantalizingly, and he was once more silent. She took pleasure, herself, in his dismay; it was food for her evil nature. A moment she gloated over it, then she abruptly added:

"I did not come to speak of this. What of Norma, our daughter?"

CHAPTER VI. HERMIONE'S DEMAND.

Rockingham Dix started. In the flood of dismay which followed recognition of Hermione he had for the time forgotten the other startling assertion she had made, but it all came back now.

"Norma—our daughter?" he repeated.

"Yes," replied Hermione.

"Now you ask me to believe more than I can, and you will not succeed in enlisting me by any such device."

"We will see. Norma is our child."

"We never had but one child, and that one died long ago—"

"Wrong!"

"Wrong?"

"Even so. She did not die; she lives. Listen, Rockingham Dix! You were deceived by me in that matter as in many others. I met you when we were both younger than we are now. You were a new convert to mission work and lately attached to this especial mission. You were good"—here she sneered—"and full of zeal. You found me living by my wits, the ally of counterfeits. When they were seized and arrested and sentenced you tried to save me like a brand from the burning—"

"Why speak of this?"

"Let me proceed: Finding my old associates gone and my occupation with them, I thought it well to pose as a brand saved from the and-so-forth. I played with you, posed as a good little girl and you fell in love with me. We were married. Sometimes I think I was a bit too severe on you, for I never had any intention of acting the goody-goody. I made my mistake, too, and thought your position must make you rich, so I married you."

"For nothing more?"

Mr. Dix asked the question apathetically. Once he would have pleaded for admission that some love was back of it all, but Hermione no longer had any hold upon him; he knew her as she was.

"For nothing more," she added, calmly.

"You were disappointed."

"We both were; your disappointment followed mine. When I found there was no money in my union with you, I cast off the mask, and I surmise that you found me a dizzy sort of a reformer."

"Omit that," directed Mr. Dix. "Things went wrong until we separated; I know all of that ghastly story. Speak of Norma—what of her?"

"Briefly, we had a child, but I took it away when I left you, and then made you believe it died. It did nothing of the sort; it lived, and, oddly enough, was a care of the mission. I had my sister bring it here and leave it under the name of Norma Rayne."

"Why?"

"Revenge! I thought it would be great sport for the child you loved so well to be a care of the mission. Your work was all outside, and you were not likely to know the child was here, so there was but little danger that you would recover it; I felt safe on that point."

"It was safe; I never went into the children's ward."

"I knew it."

"And she—she was brought here?"

"Yes. She passed two different occasions here, and became quite a mission star, I may say, but twice my sister took her

out. The child was bright; my sister admired her. You will see that our daughter lived."

"And Norma Rayne is she?"

"Yes."

Rockingham Dix leaped to his feet.

"I do not believe it!" he declared.

"I can give you proof, both documentary and through the word of persons knowing the case. I can prove all I assert, and it shall be done if you will hear it and see it. Norma is your own child!"

"Impossible!"

"See the evidence."

"The claim is absurd."

"See the evidence!" steadily directed Hermione.

Mr. Dix was silent. It had come to him suddenly that he had noticed that Norma resembled his own mother, as he remembered her. His disbelief began to waver. Thus far Hermione had watched him keenly, but she was growing less calm mentally, and she suddenly added, with more spirit:

"The evidence will convince you, but it will not do to wait for it. Delay may be fatal to Norma. I repeat what I said early in this interview—you must choke off the detective; you must stop this investigation before Norma is caught in the web and put into prison."

"She is accused of murder!" cried Mr. Dix, abruptly, his face flushing.

"Do you think her guilty?"

"No."

"Nor I."

"You know positively how it is."

"I do not, for we were not together last night. Yet I believe her innocent, but, innocent or guilty, you must stop Brown from arresting her."

"There is no evidence against here."

"Brown says there is, and he will turn the inconsequential facts into mountains until his influence has worked the mischief. Will you sit idle and see it done?"

"No."

"Our child must not go to prison."

"To prison?" cried Mr. Dix. "Never! I will see Brown; he must keep his hands off; he shall keep them off or suffer for it. Norma is not guilty; she shall not be condemned by public opinion, as an accused always is if arrested."

For the first time Hermione's face expressed satisfaction. His sudden outbreak gave evidence that the work had not been done in vain. Mr. Dix began to walk the floor, his manner thoughtful and excited.

"She must be innocent," he declared. "It is not in her to do any one harm; that is apparent from her manner. Save her? I surely will. Would I see my own flesh and blood suffer thus? No, no, never!"

Hermione nodded sharply.

"Go ahead," she directed, "and I pledge you my word I will furnish satisfactory proof that she is your daughter."

"She shall have my care and help! My daughter! How strange it seems, when I was sure my Althea died in infancy."

"She is your daughter."

"Yes, she must be a worthy girl, incapable of evil-doing—"

The missionary stopped short, hesitated, and then swooped down upon Hermione with a change of manner.

"But this claim of hers against Stephen Brown?" he cried. "You say she is my child, yet she is seeking to claim Brown as her parent—"

"She thinks he is. Do not blame her."

"But if what you say is true you know she is not his child."

"I do know it."

"Why not tell her?"

"Because she is in a fair way to get a rich parent, and I am not going to spoil the chance."

"Would you see this indignity take place?"

"Gladly."

"And thereby victimize Stephen Brown?"

"Yes."

"Then your course is infamous."

"Look you, Rockingham Dix," retorted the woman, "I have shaken hands with

adversity all my life, and I know the difference between poverty and plenty. Norma is a girl free from crime, free from vicious inclinations. If she loses this chance she will all her life be as poor as a church mouse. I have decided that she shall be rich."

"At the expense of honor?"

"Her honor will not suffer; she believes Stephen Brown to be her father."

"Does she know you are her mother?"

"No."

"What grounds has she for misbelieving Brown to be her father? Woman, have you plotted a batch of false evidence?"

"Yes."

"You must withdraw it; the claim must be dropped; the campaign against Brown must end right here."

"I will not end it; you shall not end it. I have not come here to plead, but to fight. The work planned by me shall go on; Brown must find a child in Norma. That's the plan, and, mark me, you will agree to it!"

CHAPTER VII.

AN EVASIVE SECRET.

It was a house in one of the blocks of lower New York, a place which seemed to be deserted by all but mankind and poverty. Money did not come there, and more than one wretched person had been heard to say, in the midst of despair, that God knew not of the region.

One good genius did, and that was Rockingham Dix. The place was within the area he traveled in his professional work, and his name had been blessed by more than one of the unfortunates who existed there.

In a room of the house, a place furnished so meagerly that it was scarcely furnished at all, a woman lay dying the night after the events last recorded. Two other women, as poor and almost as wretched, watched by her side.

The dying woman was not asleep, but they did not heed the words which fell from her lips as she tossed on the apology for a bed.

One of them shook her head.

"No sign o' the man," she muttered. "He might as well not come now. It is too late."

"Mary Ross has waited too long."

"It would have been all right ef that brute of a husband hadn't come in an' beat her. He has the same as killed her, but ef Tom Ross is arrested, some fool of a lawyer with no conscience will put in a plea that Tom was not accountable with the whisky enter him, an' git him off."

"Men are horrid," agreed the second woman, "and they will stand by each other when they kill their wives."

She was not allowed time to enlarge on this severe view of the male portion of mankind, for footsteps sounded outside the door, and it was opened. Another woman appeared.

"He's come," she remarked, apathetically.

A man followed her. It was Lloyd Pinckney.

The visitor looked worried and uncertain, and he paused by the door and reconnoitered with quick glances around the place. He saw how miserable it was, but his view was quickly transferred from the room to the woman on the bed.

"Am I in time?" he asked, in a subdued voice.

"We don't know," answered one of the watchers.

"She is conscious."

"Wal, she ain't asleep; but the trouble is her senses ain't much good. That brute of a Tom Ross come in, a bit ago, an' he not only struck her, but scared the little life she still has about out o' her. Sence then her mind has wandered. She's about delirious, if not quite."

Lloyd looked still at the sick woman. The sound of an unusual voice had stirred her out of her momentary quiet, and she began to move her head uneasily, but did not open her eyes.

The visitor saw she was near to death, and he grew awed.

"I am told she can reveal things of importance," he pursued.

"As ter that, all we know is that there has been a buildin' burned, an' a man or woman accused o' doin' it, but either Mary Ross—that's her on the bed—or her husband, Tom, can prove that it was not the accused person who fired the house. Mary and Tom know who did do it, an' it wasn't the accused. Mary is near the end o' life, an' she wants ter tell all about et, so the innocent won't suffer."

Lloyd had been given this information already, and he had come full of hope that Norma Rayne was to be absolved of all blame in connection with the firing of the house and the killing of his father—more, with the hope that the real criminals were to be made known.

Now, it was a shock to see the sick woman turning her head in such an unnatural way, for he knew enough of illness to be sure it was an unpromising sign.

"Speak to her," he requested.

One of the watchers advanced to the bed.

"Missus Ross!" she called; "Missus Ross!"

There was no sign of attention.

"Wake up," she added. "Somebody is here to see ye. The man has come."

Mary Ross did not open her eyes, but she fell to muttering.

"The innocent shall not suffer; I will save her. The girl did not do it; I will tell the truth, if Tom and the woman kill me for it!"

"Shake her again!" directed the second watcher.

"Wait!"

It was Lloyd who spoke, and he moved to the bedside. He was becoming very much worried by the possibility that he had come too late to learn the secret.

He bent over the sick woman and touched her gently. He moved her hands and spoke persuasively in her ears, until the watchers were moved to admiration of a gentleness of which they knew nothing.

"Why, he's as slick as Rockingham Dix, the mission man," muttered one, in surprise.

Lloyd was successful in one way, for he caused the fast-closed eyes to open. They looked up at him with unnatural brilliancy, but without much of any reason in their depths.

"Mrs. Ross," he pursued, gently, "I am the man you wanted to see."

"I wanted to see no man. I have seen too much of them already."

The retort was flung at him with fierceness which made him recoil for a moment, but he quickly returned to the work.

"You wanted to see me about the fire, you know."

"I don't know you, man."

"An innocent person is accused: You want to save her."

"Ha! you want to draw out what I know!" cried the woman; "you want me to ruin everything. It won't do; it won't catch me. I will not make the promise. No; if I die for it, I won't! Go away, Thomas, you ask it in vain. I'll not promise to hold my tongue. You would shield the guilty and let the innocent suffer. I'll do nothing of the sort; I'll send for the girl and tell her the whole truth!"

Rapidly this incoherent speech was poured forth, and Mary Ross looked at Lloyd with gleaming eyes. He had interjected several soothing speeches, but she was not to be checked. Now she paused briefly and he took advantage of the fact.

"Mrs. Ross, you do not understand who I am. Thomas Ross is not here; he is away somewhere. I am Lloyd Pinckney. Don't you remember that you sent for me?"

"You would lie to me like the rest!" was the wild reply. "You all have combined to cheat me and ruin the innocent."

"No, no! I am the friend of the innocent. I am anxious to help you. Let me hear what you have to say; tell me why you sent for me."

"I didn't send for you, and I have nothing to say to you. Ha! it is your scheme to wrest my secret from me, and injure the good and the worthy. It will not work; I will keep my own counsel and baf-

fle your plots. The guilty shall not triumph; the good shall yet win."

Lloyd turned to one of the other women.

"Can't you do something?" he asked.

"What can I do?"

"She knows you, I suppose. Speak to her; quiet her; make it clear to her that I am her friend, and the man for whom she sent."

"No use, I guess. Mary Ross is about gone."

"Is she near death?"

"Sure."

"Then the need is all the greater. Can you stir her up and recall her wandering faculties?"

"Hopeless!"

"I must have her secret. Do I understand that only she can reveal it?"

"She or Tom Ross can."

"Her drunken husband. Little hope of him."

"I guess you are right, stranger. Still, you might try it. As I understand it, there has been a buildin' burned and a man or woman is accused of it, an' they ain't guilty, an' Tom or his wife can prove it. You had better drop it, unless it is of importance ter you."

"It is."

Lloyd spoke sharply. The message had come to him more clearly than it was now told, and he had come under definite promise that if he was there Mary Ross would prove Norma innocent, and point out the real criminal or criminals. No proof had been adduced that this could be done, and he now had a sudden fear.

"What was Mary Ross's condition when she sent word to me?"

"Not so bad as now."

"Was she conscious?"

"At times she was, but her mind had begun to wander."

Lloyd was in a wretched frame of mind. It was bad enough to lose a father, but to know that he had fallen by the work, indirect or otherwise, of Norma Rayne was something terrible to contemplate. The young man believed her innocent, and he was eager to prove it.

His thoughts worried him greatly, and he advanced to the bedside and made another effort to rouse the dying woman. He tried in vain; the period of wandering now upon her mind was to be permanent as far as this world was concerned, and light did not come to her.

She muttered and talked, and always on one subject, but never with a gleam of consciousness.

From the first she had been very weak, and Lloyd noticed that her strength was ebbing.

"She's about gone," remarked one of the watchers.

"A doctor," exclaimed Lloyd. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Young man, she don't need him. What she needs is a grave-digger," croaked the woman.

"Hush! she may hear you."

"Not she. Mary Ross is done with hearing."

The head had ceased to turn and the lips to mutter. The sick woman lay gasping, but even this sign of life grew fainter, until one of the watchers suddenly announced:

"Her breath has stopped!"

It was not correct, for the closed eyes opened, and Mary Ross looked around the room. The faintest possible gleam of reason was marked in the dull orbs, and her lips unclosed.

"Bring him here!" she whispered. "The girl is innocent; she did not do it!"

Lloyd moved quickly to her side again.

"What is it?" he demanded, excitedly. "Who is guilty?"

She looked at him, but only momentarily. She closed her eyes again, and the watcher bent over her.

"She's gone!" was the whispered comment.

"Gone!" echoed Lloyd.

"Dead!"

He caught up her hand; he felt of her pulse. It was barely perceptible, but while he held the wrist the throbbing went out wholly. Lloyd looked at the face and knew the truth. Mary Ross was dead,

and her lips would never reveal the secret she had longed to tell; she had sent for him too late.

"Lost!" he cried, regretfully.

"You'll have ter depend on Tom, now."

"Tom?"

"The husband, you know. He had the same secret."

"Where is he to be found?"

"In some saloon."

"I'll go to him. I'll have this secret if I live!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPORT AT HIVE KEENER'S.

Lloyd started away from the bedside but his impetuous movements were checked by the dry comment of one of the women.

"There are only about ten thousand saloons in the city; Tom Ross will be in one of them."

"Do you mean that he has no regular resort?"

"That's jest it. If you are goin' ter depend on Tom you may as well know somethin' about him. Tom is a beast. He has made life a terror ter his poor wife by his drinkin' habits, an' he seldom is sober, an' never works. He is a ragged blackguard, an' lives only ter drink whisky. A bigger rascal you can't find nowhere."

"Is he a criminal?"

"Not that I knows on; he can't stop drinkin' long enough ter be that. Your chances ain't o' the best ef you want ter find him; they are still worse ef you want ter get information out o' him—though he would sell a secret or his soul fer whisky."

Lloyd stood inactive. His heart sank as he looked to the future. The truth was, he was in love with Norma Rayne, and, fully believing her innocent of all complicity with his father's death, he wanted to clear her, and do it immediately.

He knew that Detective James Brown was seeking to get a warrant on which to arrest Norma. He believed the evidence to be insufficient to justify an arrest at that time, but the detective might use influence and secure it after all.

Eager to shield the girl from the disgrace of arrest, he wished to solve the mystery before more sorrow could be added to his burden.

One of the other watchers had been looking attentively at Lloyd, and his serious expression seemed to have touched her.

"What has been told you about the trouble of findin' Tom is all true," she now volunteered, "but your very best chance is ter go ter Hive Keener's chop-house. I know that Tom herds there a good 'eal, an' it is the likeliest place ter spot him."

Lloyd had never heard of Hive Keener's chop-house, but he asked for and received a description of that place and its locality. According to the woman, it was a very low, and not by any means honest, place, where oysters and other eatables could be had in front, while a bar and several private rooms were attached.

The private rooms were the resort of that class of sports who found their headquarters in saloons and tried to cut a big dash on nothing but money obtained in doubtful ways.

Clearly, the resort was not one a decent man would seek from choice, but Lloyd could not afford to let that stand in his way now; he was out to clear Norma, and he was willing to dare danger to do it.

He decided to go to Hive Keener's chop-house.

He had gone as far as the door, when he suddenly stopped and looked at the dead woman. He had noticed at first that her face was not of the rough, low character seen in the class around her, and he remembered that she might need friends now.

"Mrs. Ross is done with life," he observed. "What now?"

One of the watchers shrugged her shoulders.

"Potter's Field," was her brief comment.

"Was she utterly friendless?"

"Worse than that; she had a husband."

"Is there nobody with money to bury her?"

"Would she live in this house if she had anybody with money?"

"She shall be decently buried, and not in the Potter's Field. I will send an undertaker and pay all his charges. I infer that nobody will object."

"Not a soul, yer honor, an' poor Mary will sleep the better for your goodness."

"It shall be done. I will see to it now."

Lloyd left the house. As much as his need of haste seemed, he attended to that charitable duty first, and, seeing an undertaker, made sure that the dead woman would receive Christian burial.

Next he went to Hive Keener's chop-house. He entered the door and saw a good-sized room, with many inmates around little tables. A part of them were eating, but more seemed to find drinking a more pressing need, and beer foamed on many a table or in the unclean hands of the frequenters.

Lloyd did not know Tom Ross, and he was about to resort to the expediency of inquiring for him, when a name floated to his ears in the midst of a remark at one side.

"So you are sure Tom Ross has got out of sight?"

"Dead sure, yer honor."

"Where has he gone?"

"Dunno."

"You must have some idea?"

"I ain't got none."

"But you and he were friends."

"Jest why he didn't tell me where he was goin'. My advice is ef you want ter hide, don't tell yer friends."

Lloyd's attention had been drawn to the speakers, and held fast. A name had been sounded that proved of interest to him, and he stopped short and listened, though he assumed a far-away look and did not seem to be so wrapt as he really was.

Of the strangers, one was a very ragged man, with all of the points of the typical tramp, while the other wore good clothes, and doubtless thought himself very elegant of attire in general, though he was too flashy to have any standing in good company.

He was about thirty years old; the ragged man was middle-aged, shaggy of hair and beard, and dirty of face and hands.

The younger man laughed at the last remark.

"Bob, you are a philosopher," he declared.

"I know enough not to trust my friends," responded Bob.

"So does Tom Ross, according to your account."

"Sure! Tom has dug fer his hole an' left nothin' but the electricity from his boots when he run so fast."

"I wish I could see the fellow. If you run upon him tell him he is wanted—well, you know my name."

"Gus Wayland, an' you're a champion high-roller."

"Cheese it! No names here, Bob Blunt. See!—I give you your own coin. To resume. Bob, I may need you if Tom has really flew the coop. I have some jobs I want done, an' there is money in it."

"Consider me your pineapple. Tom won't show up; he tol' me ef he stayed around here he would get it where Adam got the apple—in the neck."

"Tom knows so much it is wise for him to hide a bit."

"All because you told him to, though."

"Maybe, maybe," admitted Wayland, musingly. "Never mind, though; he can come back one of these days. Fact is, old man, I am playing my cards to marry a sweet little girl, and that's why Tom has been ordered to hide. He has done it too well, though, it seems, if I can't find him. Where the deuce can he have gone? But he will show up, and in the meanwhile I will try to make things all

right with my honeysuckle. She is in trouble just now, and crime has been alleged against her—all along of a fire and the killing. She may be guilty, Bob, but that won't scare me off—not by a long shot. If she is really guilty, why, it shows her pluck. See?"

"You know whether she is guilty."

"No, I don't."

"Then why did you send Tom Ross off?"

"I didn't send him. It was like this: Tom was scared of what he knew, and I gave him advice, and it was to hide. I don't know whether there was real need of it; I didn't send Tom. I advised him, and that is all."

"It don't matter, as long as he went."

"No. Now, don't let us talk of this any more. Drop it! Let's have another drink and then I will leave you."

Lloyd stood inactive. He did not know what to think of the pair, but if they told the truth, there was no such thing as finding Tom, and Gus Wayland had declared that he had no information on the subject. It seemed that it would be well to let him alone.

One thing impressed Lloyd, however; if he understood the situation, Gus was in love with Norma, though he was not aware that she knew him. He did not like the looks of Wayland, the "high-roller," nor relish having such a rival. While he felt sure he would find no favor with Norma, he was not a desirable man to have mixed up with her affairs.

Wayland and Bob had dropped all business but attention to the bar, so Lloyd bought a cigar and left the place. He started homeward, meditating on what he had heard.

His belief in Norma's innocence had been strengthened greatly, and he now felt that she could be cleared if he could learn all the facts. It had resolved itself into a matter where a man was wanted to prove the truth. Could the man be found?

Lloyd was hurrying along when he was suddenly checked by hearing his name pronounced. He turned and saw Detective James Brown.

"I want a word with you," abruptly announced the latter.

"You can speak," ungraciously replied the younger man.

"It is about your father's death."

"Well?"

"I hear that you are still harboring Miss Norma Rayne, or, at least, she is at your uncle's."

"What of it?" snapped Lloyd.

"Just this; you outrage decency by your course. Drop Miss Rayne, or you will get into trouble."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MEEK SUB-MISSIONARY.

Lloyd Pinckney looked Mr. Brown in the face with no sign of good will implanted on his own visage. He had too much trouble to meet kindly such words from one he knew to be an enemy of Norma Rayne. He felt like throttling the detective, but he tried, instead, to remain calm.

"Are you the one who is going to make trouble for me?" he demanded.

"No; it is a woman," replied Brown.

"A woman?"

"Norma Rayne."

"Explain yourself, sir."

"Your father lies dead under conditions which point to Miss Norma and her haggard friend, Hermione Legrand, as guilty of complicity in the affair, yet you take them to the honored home of your uncle—and in defiance of your father's blood."

"Well, sir?"

"Is it well?"

"Just as well as for you to try to fix guilt upon innocent persons!"

"So you believe them innocent?"

"There is not an iota of proof to the contrary."

"Do you so defy my evidence?"

"You have none, unless you know more than you have told. Your wild charges are not evidence, sir."

"I will make them so! I feel that I am

on the right track, and I mean to prove it. How will you stand then, exposed as the harbinger of your father's murderer?"

"We will consider that when you prove it."

"I am near enough so that I shall soon have hem under lock and key. I hardly have the evidence now to arrest them off-hand, but I shall apply for a warrant in the morning."

"Mr. Brown, I ask you out of humanity to go slow in this. Do not seek to disgrace them needlessly; get your proof before you act."

"I'll get my woman and then the proof," snapped the Police Special.

"Sir, you are actuated in all this by spite and personal prejudice; you hate them and care only to gratify your grudge."

"Do you suppose I am going to have them prey upon my brother if I can help it? The audacity of the girl Norma! My brother's daughter! It is outrageous!"

"Two wrongs do not make one right. Go slow, sir; go slow, and do justice to yourself, as well as to them."

"Your course, Pinckney, is shameful. You care nothing for your father, or his memory, or his murder, and are all wrapped up in those who killed him. Common decency demands that you bestir yourself and stop such outrageous conduct."

"I will not listen to your insinuations and insults further, and if you pile more of them upon my head, I shall try to chastise you."

Brown's expression changed suddenly.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed. "I did not think to stir up such a tempest. Possibly I am too zealous in this to suit you, but I shall be no more than just. I shall do them no wrong; there shall be no more than justice in the case. Still, Pinckney, you had better take my advice—ship the women, for they are a bad lot."

"Their disposition to do wrong is not yet proven; yours is!" curtly replied Lloyd. "That is all I have to say to you, sir. Good-night."

Turning abruptly, the younger man walked away rapidly. He was not interrupted; not a word came from Detective James Brown.

A few minutes more of walking took Lloyd close to his home. He was passing along in deep thought and with the mental indignation of a lover who finds the object of his passion accused, when he heard a sharp voice close to him.

"You villain!" was the cry, "you will obey me, or find your house of cards tumbling into pieces!"

Lloyd aroused, rather glad that something had happened to change the current of his thoughts. He looked quickly, and saw a man and a woman not far off. They stood side by side, and were evidently deep in the subject being discussed between them, and the observer was at once impressed by the belligerent attitude of the woman.

The man seemed to shrink from her, and she took a pace nearer to him, adding, with fierce emphasis:

"You will obey me in this or come to grief!"

"Now, go light," urged the man. "There is no cause for such passion."

"Isn't there? What would you call cause? You can mark it down as a fact that you are to drop all this. If you don't, down goes your house of cards."

"But—"

"I am not going to argue; I simply say you will obey me."

It was an imperious answer, and Lloyd lost no part of it. He was finding this talk of interest to him, for he knew the speakers. The one was Jones Laken, of the mission; the other was Hermione Legrand.

Lloyd was surprised. He had not expected to find Hermione there, and her bold stand against Jones was equally unexpected, though the young man had before then discovered that Hermione had plenty of courage and energy. Now he smiled grimly.

"She is making her mark. Plainly, she is ordering Laken to let up on his testimony against her and Norma, and if his manner is any criterion, she has frightened the fellow."

Perhaps this was true, but Lloyd heard no more to prove it. Mr. Laken cast an anxious glance around, though without discovering the watcher. Possibly he asked for caution, for both now lowered their voices and nothing was to be heard.

"I will delay a little and see Miss Legrand home," thought Lloyd. "This is a rough place for her to be at this hour."

The conversation continued. Hermione did not change her angry, commanding manner, and Jones Laken showed various moods, including anger, as he made his replies, but he seemed to talk in vain. She kept up to the work, and he was talked out of the race, if nothing more.

Finally she made a move to go. Jones stood sullen and ugly, and let her have her own way. As she prepared to depart her voice was raised.

"Will you do as I ask you?"

"I shall have to," growled Jones.

"Do it, and you are safe. Be prudent, my dear sir, and all will go well with you. Refuse—well, that means mischief to you. Now I will go. Good night!"

She turned and walked away briskly. Jones stood inactive, gazing after her. The chance was open for Lloyd to carry out his plan of acting as escort, but he was unwilling to let Jones see him, and he stood still.

A moment later the mission worker turned and came rapidly past the watcher. Lloyd noticed that his face was dark and frowning, and that he was muttering angrily to himself. Lloyd tried to catch the words, but heard nothing. He passed on and was lost to sight.

"Singular!" murmured Lloyd. "She has tamed him when he wanted to go wild. How has she done it, and how far will her influence go?"

CHAPTER X.

BROWN COMES TO MAKE ARREST.

The forenoon of the next day was wear-ing along, when Detective James Brown left a city building and wended his way along the street with rapid steps and an air of deep satisfaction.

"Done, at last!" he murmured, jubilantly. "I could never have gone to the extreme of arresting her without a warrant, and I must admit there was little to justify one being issued, but the justice was literally talked blind when I got at him, and I have this paper because he wanted to get rid of me."

He slapped his pocket and brought forth a rattling sound.

Brown had not found fresh evidence against Norma, but he had done what pleased him just as much; he had gained authority to arrest her for the slaying of Ezra Pinckney.

"We will see if she will hound my brother any more!" he added.

It was vindictively said, yet he was not the worst man in the world. Nobody had even accused him of baseness or mean-ness, but he had been enraged by the claim Norma had made on his brother, and, believing she had no ground for the claim, he had developed into a merciless enemy in his efforts to head her off.

People were speaking harshly of her, and chiefly through the artful work of James Brown. He knew how to create public sentiment, and he talked until there was an unpleasant murmur on all sides against her. Believing he was only doing his duty to his brother, he cared nothing for the position in which she was placed.

On the present occasion he did not check his rapid steps until he reached an old-fashioned, but neat looking building. It was the house of Zacheus Pinckney. The detective's face clouded.

"It is a shame," he muttered, "that Lloyd should find harbor for the girl when he knows everybody accuses her of murdering his father. However, I will be true to dead Ezra Pinckney, if his own flesh and blood have deserted him. Now for it!"

He rang the bell. A servant appeared.
"I wish to see Miss Norma Rayne," announced Brown.

"She is engaged."
"Engaged?"

"Yes, sir. She, Mr. Pinckney and his nephew, Lloyd, are in the library, and busy."

The detective was not slow to see that this elaborate explanation indicated definite orders from somebody, and that the servant was only repeating her lesson.

He stepped into the hall.

"Inform them that I am here," he directed.

"Very well, sir."

The girl accepted his intrusion calmly, and ushered him into the parlor, after which she disappeared.

"Are they going to try the bluff act?" he wondered. "If that is it, they will get wofully left. I have a bit of paper in my pocket that will defy bluffs of all sorts."

Anticipation of something of this sort had not improved his temper, and he was not an amiable caller to have. Silence had followed the departure of the servant, but steps now sounded in the hall. Brown quickly distinguished them as those of a man, and he was impressed with the fact that they were firm, steady and slow.

"Somebody comes in a mood of defiance or strong self-reliance," thought the caller. "Is it Zacheus Pinckney or his nephew?"

The door opened, but Mr. Brown did not see either of the Pinckneys. Instead, he had a surprise when he beheld Rockingham Dix.

Mr. Dix was calm of face and unruffled of manner. He bowed with polite attention to the caller.

"Good-morning," he began, serenely. "I am told that you wish to see one of the family."

"So I do," answered Brown, "but I do not see them yet."

It was a pointed remark, but the missionary was not influenced by it. He sat down with the same air of composure.

"Both Mr. Pinckney and Lloyd are busy now, and I have been requested to represent them. In what way can we serve you?"

"I have come to serve a warrant on Norma Rayne."

"On the old charge?"
"To arrest her for murdering Ezra Pinckney!"

It was ugly information, but Mr. Dix remained as cool as ever.

"Then you have the paper?"

"Yes. You can look at it—"
"It is not necessary; I do not doubt that it is all you say. Pray, upon whom did you force the conviction that there was evidence enough to justify action at this stage of affairs?"

"I have not forced the conviction upon anybody; I am not proceeding like a man in ambush, nor like an enemy, sir."

Mr. Brown spoke warmly, and his hearer hastened to reply:

"Pardon me, sir; I meant no harm. All I wished to say was that I do not regard the evidence as enough to justify an arrest."

"I have the warrant."
"Mr. Brown, would it not be well to defer action in this?"

"And let the girl escape?"
"She does not intend to run away."

"When a person is in the Tombs she will not run away; that's flat."

"I should esteem it a favor to me, Mr. Brown, if you would wait awhile before taking radical action. There are various reasons for this—your professional standing, the lack of evidence, and the danger that mischievous tongues might say you have acted from motives of revenge. As the girl had a claim against your brother, it would look bad if you exhibited undue zeal, wouldn't it?"

The detective moved uneasily.
"I know she is guilty, and I will clear myself of possible blame by proving her guilt."

"If you are so sure, why not get your evidence and then apply for the warrant?"

Brown began to twist again. With all his faults, he had some regard for his professional reputation, and for his family name, and he was impressed by Mr. Dix's temperate, solemn manner.

"It does not seem right to me," he answered, "to let a criminal have a chance to escape."

"To this I will reply, first, that you have thus far absolutely no evidence against the girl; secondly, that I will be responsible for her presence while this case is on."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"What is Norma Rayne to you?"

"One of God's creatures," soberly answered the missionary.

"Then you act only from philanthropy?"

"I want guilt proven against the girl before her life is blasted by unjust accusations. The person in this case is a girl, young and friendless. Shall we doom her?"

The detective looked down and seemed to waver.

"You don't know her much—how can you be responsible for her being found when wanted?"

"I have talked with her, and I make myself responsible."

"Well, I don't know—"

"More, I will help you in ferreting out the assassin of Ezra Pinckney, be it who it may. For doing this I ask no credit; I am not a detective, I do not want to be one, and I want no fame connected with the work. You shall have the full meed of glory."

Brown showed that he was not an evil-minded man in all ways by flushing as the last words were spoken.

"I am not so mean as to deny you your share, sir. You seem to have got a wrong idea as to this case, anyhow. I am not trying to persecute anybody, nor to be unjust. I will prove it now—you shall have your way."

Rockingham Dix's face lighted up.

"You will let the girl go free for the time?"

"I will hold the warrant in abeyance. I guess nobody can run far away if they want to; you shall have it as you will. I'll get my evidence before I arrest anybody."

"Good! You please me now, sir; this is manly and honorable."

"Foolish, too, no doubt."

"And just."

"Maybe."

"Well, Mr. Brown, we have this settled, and now you can regard me as your ally. You know my calling takes me into the worst places in this ward; I may find something soon that you will want to hear."

"I hope so."

The detective answered politely, but it was plain he was not pleased with the turn of events, nor inclined to do more than acquiesce for the time in the missionary's plan. He had simply been persuaded against his will, and Mr. Dix knew he had secured no more than a reprieve.

The detective would leave the house only to take up the trail with avidity, and his zeal would lead him to undertake, not merely to learn who killed Ezra Pinckney, but to envelop Norma in the meshes of the web.

He would convict her if possible.

Brown had nothing more to say, and he wound up the interview and left the house. Mr. Dix saw him to the door, and then went to another part of the house. Norma and Hermione were waiting for him there. Each showed some signs of nervousness, and Norma looked ill and wretched. Her eyes questioned so eagerly that the missionary quickly ended her anxiety.

"Victory!" he remarked, quietly.

"Is he gone?"

"Yes."

"Has he promised to let me alone?"

"For the time being, yes."

"But not permanently?"

"He will not arrest you until he has something to base arrest on, and that is

equivalent to saying you will have no more trouble—I think."

The last words were slowly added. Mr. Dix was not convinced of his own assertion; he feared she would have more trouble.

CHAPTER XI. STRANGE NEWS.

Lloyd Pinckney was not content to sit down and wait for information to come to him, and, as his recollection of missing Tom Ross and the secret he was said to hold was often returning to him, he determined to do something more to try to locate the man.

Tom was gone, but all accounts represented him as a man reduced to meanest poverty, and Lloyd argued that such a man was likely to drift back home unless he really was afraid to do so. It was to be supposed that he did not know his wife was dead, and, as she had practically supported him for years, he might return, sober or intoxicated, to try and get money.

Believing thus, the young man took his way back to the house where he had seen Mary Ross die.

It was not hard to find the women who had been present on the occasion mentioned, and they greeted him with warmth not common to their desolate lives.

"So you've come ter see Mary before she is buried?" ventured one. "Wal, you couldn't see a prettier sight. The poor dear does just look fine. All the harm Tom did her has gone out o' her expression, an' there is peace on her face."

"I trust my wishes have been complied with by the undertaker," replied Lloyd.

"Right well."

"Has Tom Ross been back?"

"Not he."

"Any word from him?"

"No. He won't show up here again, fer he knows his wife is past diggin' her fingers off fer him."

"There is something in that."

"There's a good deal. Tom is the worst man I ever seen."

"No worse than all the men," croaked the second woman. "Any man will let his wife support him, if she's big enough fool ter do it."

"I can hardly believe Tom is going to disappear permanently," Lloyd added. "Such a man is pretty sure to wander back to old haunts. Now, if you will keep an eye open for Tom, and let me know immediately if he does show up, it will mean dollars in your pocket."

"Say, boss, who said dollars?"

The question came in a new voice, and Lloyd turned quickly. By the door was a boy of some fourteen years, who had entered unheard by the young man. He made the inquiry with considerable eagerness, and as he had the stamp of the region all over him it was not to be doubted that dollars had a charm for him.

Lloyd noticed that he had a keen, wide-awake face, and he did not snub him. Instead, it occurred to him that the boy might be a good person for him to know. He was about to answer in friendly vein, when one of the women curtly exclaimed:

"So you're back, Ira? Get out with you; go an' do somethin' fer your keep."

"Now, see here, Marn Pond," replied Ira, "don't you get gay. Yer caller here will git ont er the spots in yer breedin' ef you whisk yer tongue too free."

"You git out o' this house!" cried the Mrs. Pond, angrily.

"A cop told me ter git inter it, so ef I mind both o' you et will sorter strain my ingenuity," replied Ira, with a grin.

Lloyd did not see that this conversation was anything to him, but the boy suddenly turned his way again.

"Did I understand you ter say that you had dollars ter give fer information of Tom Ross?" he added.

"I did say so," replied Lloyd.

"I am the jewsharp you want," confidently declared Ira. "I reckon that cop is off the block now, so jest come an' we will hev a Bowery chin. See?"

Ira winked to the young man, and laid a finger mysteriously on his lips, so, as there did not seem to be any chance of getting information from the women,

Lloyd followed the boy out. Once on the sidewalk, Ira suddenly turned and caught Lloyd by the button.

"Say," he demanded, "be you the giraffe that paid ter bury Mary Ross?"

"Yes."

"Then you can't be a bad egg. About Tom, now! Somethin' is up!"

"In what way?"

"Ever heard of one Gus Wayland?"

"Yes."

"He's been buyin' a dead man!"

"What!" cried Lloyd, startled.

"What of it? Folks buy dead chickens—if they hev' the price—why not dead men?"

"Make yourself clear."

"Can't be clearer. Gus has bought jest that."

"Is this of interest to me?"

"Mister, you want ter find Tom Ross?"

"Ef Tom's mortal remains are fished up from the river, don't weep fer him until I say that Tom is dead."

"Do you mean—"

"Gus has a skin game on. He's bought a dead man, an' now he will fix him up an' hev' him identified as Tom Ross."

"Are you really in earnest in this?"

"Yes; an' so is Gus."

"Give me particulars."

"Well, it is like this. Another kid told me a funny thing this mornin'. Says he, 'You know the man who was found dead over by the gas-house last night?' Says I, 'Yes.' Says the other kid, 'Some thought he would be buried as a popper, 'cause he wasn't knowned by nobody, but he won't. A man has took him inter charge an' paid the bills the unknown contracted by dyin', an' now the stranger is all right, but, do ye know, the generous chap is Gus Wayland.'"

"Sure?"

"I'm tellin' of ye what the other kid says ter me. He soon went off, but I stood and meditated with loud thinks. I was right onter somethin', an' it interested me. Gus Wayland as a gent with a heart was worse than a freak, an' I knowed there was somethin' inter it. Now, boss, w'ot is it?"

"You say the plan is to have the dead man identified as Tom Ross."

"Guesswork, boss."

Lloyd was silent. He had been impressed by Ira's surmise, wild as some persons might think it, for he had seen enough of Gus to believe that he never would have ambition to pose as a good genius. There was no fine feeling in Wayland's nature, and he would not drop any money to save a poor man from a pauper's grave—he would rather have the money to spend in his life about town.

Ira watched his companion closely. He had become interested, and now that he had a well-dressed man back of him, he grew ambitious to be more active in the case.

Suddenly Lloyd looked up.

"Where is this dead man now?"

"Dunno."

"That is bad."

"Say, do yer want ter know?"

"Yes."

"We will find him!" eagerly declared Ira.

"Can it be done?"

"Why, sure."

"Then do it, and I will pay you for your trouble. Are you able to keep a secret?"

"Bet yer uppers!"

"If such is the case, you and I may be mutually valuable to each other. I am not forgetful of the fact that a boy like you is the best posted of all the street perambulators of New York, and if you can, as you assert, keep a secret, there is money in this for you if you will work for me."

"I will, an' I don't ask no recommends from you," seriously answered Ira. "Jest indicate yer wishes, an' I'm with yer fer keeps."

"I want to see that dead man of yours, or of Wayland's, if you prefer. How can it be done?"

"We must not be too spry about it, boss. S'pose you let me scout a bit an' report results ter you, later?"

"Very well."

"I guess I kin find where it is, an' I'll rickershay ter that end. See?"

"Yes. Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes."

"When shall I hear from you?"

"I don't want ter be reckless in this, fer et might spoil the whole biz. S'pose I meet ye at a given point at six this eve?"

Lloyd could see no better plan, so it was arranged in that way. Ira hastened off to "scout," and his employer took his way toward home.

"What will come of this?" he wondered. "Possibly nothing—but I will not take that view of it. It is very striking that Gus Wayland wants to buy a dead man, as the boy puts it, and the lead is worth working. He knew missing Tom Ross and admitted advising him, and all this may fall into line. There may be exciting times this evening."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ALLIES TAKE BIG RISKS.

By the time appointed for the next stage of affairs, Lloyd had been allowed opportunity to reflect more fully, and he began to wonder if he would see anything more of his youthful ally. Ira was a stranger to him, and he was a boy. Would his zeal hold good?

Lloyd had a practical answer. Ira put in an appearance before six o'clock, looking cheerful and determined. Lloyd had received him in his private room, but when he asked as to the development of affairs, his ally put his finger to his lips and looked mysterious.

"Be we alone?" Ira inquired.

"Can't you see we are?"

"No listeners?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Then I will open my molars. Boss, we are right inter it."

"Explain."

"Ever hear o' John Jacks's junk-shop?"

"Why, it's right in the rear of where I used to live before my own home was burned."

"Know John Jacks?"

"No. His exit was, of course, on the next street. I never spoke with him. I've known him by sight, however, ever since I was a boy."

"What's his character?"

"I never heard anything detrimental to it. He is a singular man, and taciturn and unsocial to a marked degree. More than this I do not know of him. Why do you ask? Is he in the game?"

"The dead man is in his shop."

"What?"

"Fact. I've found that much out. Gus Wayland evidently don't think the unknown man needs ter be buried right away; he has took him ter John Jacks's shop, by jing!"

"That is remarkable. Jacks had the reputation of being an honest man; I do not see why he should let his premises be used thus."

"We needn't argy on John's moral character; the point is that the biz is as I say."

"Well, what next?"

"That is all I know, except that Gus has been quite busy. Looks ter me as ef this night would settle the case. Gus won't keep his dead man in the shop long, an' so, why won't he move him ter-night?"

Lloyd knit his brows thoughtfully.

"I wish we could get into that shop!" he exclaimed.

"Jest my wish, an' I don't see why we can't. I hev' been lookin' the field over, an' I reckon I kin lead the way ef you will foller. We'll slide in secret-like, an' then see all the fun that takes place, by jing!"

"Can it be done?"

"Come with me."

Ira's manner was full of quiet confidence, and Lloyd was not disposed to let any chance slip. Darkness was near at hand, and he calculated on the cover it would furnish, and told the boy to do as he had planned. Ira's eyes sparkled, and he set out on the expedition. He led the way directly to the site of the burned Pinckney house. For a while Lloyd forgot their mission as he looked at the ruins, and a sigh escaped his lips. How

wofully had the happy days he had spent there faded away.

He was not given much time to think on the subject. His guide passed by the side of the ruins, and they were in the yard. Beyond them rose the modest structure where John Jacks did business—a two-storied building, old, weather-beaten and dismal of appearance.

"Now ter go in," remarked Ira.

"How can we?"

"By the winder."

"That will come pretty close to unlawful enterin'."

"Mighty close! Still, ain't the game worth the powder?"

Lloyd hesitated only for a moment. Much as he objected to such a proceeding, he felt that he could not afford to let the chance pass.

"Go on!" he finally directed.

Ira went. He moved close to the window and laid hold of the sash. He had been there before and knew what to expect. Now, it was no surprise when the window yielded to his touch, and he made an open way. This done, he wriggled inside with dexterity.

"Hustle, before anybody sees yer," he suggested.

Lloyd obeyed, and stood with his ald. They were then in John Jacks's building, and in utter darkness.

"I don't know nothin' any further," proceeded Ira, "but I kin find all there is ter find. Sorter hang close ter my skirts, an' we will see where we be."

With very light steps the boy moved on, and by means of feeling he found a door and opened it a trifle. He looked for a moment, and then reclosed it, returned to Lloyd, and pulled him forward. The latter then had his look, too.

He saw John Jacks seated by a bench, smoking a very disreputable pipe and looking calm and unconcerned. John was a man of some fifty years, rough of dress and personal characteristics, and looking as if he needed a bath and did not know it.

After a brief survey Ira closed the door.

"All hunk!" he whispered.

"John is alone?"

"Yes."

Thump! thump! thump!

"Hello! Somebody knockin'!" added Ira.

The junk-dealer rose, went to the door and opened it. The intruders used their point of survey and watched the result. A man appeared at the door.

"Gus Wayland!" murmured Lloyd.

"Et's the high roller fer sure. Watch out!"

Wayland entered quickly, and a second man followed after. It was Bob Blunt, the tramp.

"Well," began the high-roller, quickly, "how goes it?"

"Nothin' new," replied John Jacks, serenely.

"No police around?"

"Not one."

"Then we can do the first act in the drama without danger, perhaps. Mr. Jacks, I have brought you a bit of tobacco."

Gus extended his hand, but it was not tobacco that showed in it. Instead, there was a roll of bank-notes which looked fresh and inviting. John Jacks pocketed the gift without signs of emotion.

"I sometimes smoke," he grimly replied.

"Now to business," pursued Wayland.

"The box is all right, is it, Mr. Jacks?"

"Yes."

"How about Tom Ross?" inquired Bob Blunt, with a grin.

"He has lain still," calmly responded John.

The room where the three men were was large, irregular, dirty, and a terrible sample of disorder. It was the main business room of the junk-dealer, and his possessions were piled up on all sides. Among them were several boxes.

Gus took the lamp and advanced to one of these boxes. He removed the cover. There was nothing in the shape of the box to suggest a human being's coffin, but the

high-roller gazed down at some invisible object meditatively.

"Death brings us to this," he murmured.

"He sleeps well," reminded John Jacks, puffing serenely at his pipe, and hardly glancing that way.

"I wonder if he ever had any pleasure in life."

Bob Blunt looked down at his miserable clothes.

"He dressed like me," replied the tramp; "I don't think he did."

"They've got the dead man in that dry-goods case," whispered Ira.

"Yes," agreed Lloyd.

"Wot shall we do?"

"I don't know. I don't like to expose ourselves, for we cannot then work against Gus as we wish."

"I feel in my bones that there is goin' ter be a ruction here," declared Ira, shaking his head.

"Bob Blunt," ordered Wayland, "come here."

Bob shuffled up to the box.

"Look on this face," pursued Gus.

"I'm a-lookin'," answered Bob.

"Does the dead man really resemble Tom Ross?"

"Sure!"

"No idle talk, now. It wil not tickle my fancy to have you sneeze every time I take snuff. You knew Tom Ross well. Is this clay like him, I ask?"

"Boss, they are dead ringers for each other, especially this one. The same nose, the same eyes, and the gineral contower o' the visages is as like as two cable cars."

"We must try the experiment. Tom Ross must die to the world, so he can live as somebody else; this man must be active in death, so he can die as somebody he was not when he died to himself. See?"

"You put et so clear that I see all," replied Bob, slowly.

"Now to work," added Gus, with vim. "Get your muscles tuned up, for we have big risks to take and victories to win. Turn over the box. We want to see our nameless friend for a final look. Over with the box!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE TURN OF AFFAIRS.

Gus had seized one end of the box, but Bob Blunt now showed some trepidation. He nervously asked:

"Can't we do this with him in the box? I sorter hate ter be too public about it. Let's do it with him right where he is."

"Have your own way," the high-roller replied. "Only get to work."

So saying, Wayland caught up a big bag, and the two men busied themselves working over something in the box.

"They're baggin' up the stranger," whispered Ira Pond.

"So it seems," answered Lloyd.

"Be we goin' ter allow it?"

"Upon my word, I don't know what to do."

"S'pose we dash right out an' make a muss?"

"No, we want to avoid that if we can. We might call in the police, but that would bring too much of a crisis about, and I had rather let the matter go on quietly until we have Gus more secure. Wait for the next move, and then I will decide what we are to do."

Wayland and Bob Blunt finally ceased work by the box. All this while John Jacks had sat in utter unconcern, smoking as calmly as if he had been all alone in the room. His manner was a surprise to Ira, but Lloyd did not forget the junk-dealer's old reputation for eccentricity.

Wayland stepped back.

"Is all ready?" he inquired.

"I guess so," answered Bob.

"Mr. Jacks, shall we go now?" added Gus.

"Do as ye please," indifferently returned John.

The high-roller stepped close to the table and blew out the light. It was a step which took both Lloyd and Ira by surprise, and the former heard a little gasp of wonder from his ally. The larger room

was in utter darkness, and the motive of the sport was not to be seen then.

"Wot—wot—wot's up?" gasped Ira.

"Wait! Listen!"

In breathless eagerness Lloyd bent forward, and proceeded to follow out his own last direction. His eyes were not of use then, so he relied upon his ears to tell him what the plotters were doing.

"They move about," he muttered.

"Goin' out," added Ira.

"How do you know?"

"They move toward the door."

"True! Ah! the knob rattles; they open the door; the light of the street shines in somewhat; they seem to be in conversation with somebody."

"Somebody else comes in!"

"Yes. He steps heavier than they, and Gus cautions him. Who can he be? Ah! they go close to the box—"

"Be they goin' to take that dead man out? Mebbe they—"

"Listen!"

"Lift lustily!" came in Wayland's voice.

"They're takin' him off!" whispered Ira, excitedly. "Be we goin' ter stand here an' let 'em do jest as they please?"

That was exactly what Lloyd wanted to know. He did not know how to meet the difficulty. To call in the police, or to attempt to baffle the plotters, himself, openly, was to put an end to all secrecy. Yet, they must not be allowed to carry out their scheme successfully.

He heard them move toward the door.

"Come!" he suddenly directed to Ira. "We must do something!"

He left his covert, and the boy followed. The darkness concealed them, though Lloyd was able to make out John Jacks standing calmly at one side, and the others nearing the door. Close to that point they paused, apparently because one of the party hesitated.

"Go on!" urged Gus.

"Say," remonstrated Bob, "what ef a cop has got inter the region?"

"Nonsense! There is no cop near."

"I don't want him ter see me playin' body-snatcher."

"Bah! Go on!"

"Say, you hold the load up, an' I'll take a squint."

Bob made a bolt toward the street, and the sudden acquisition of dead weight was too much for Gus and his other aid. They let the burden drop.

"Now is our time!" whispered Ira. "Slide out, an' ef we hev' ter fight 'em, we'll do it on the street. See."

Lloyd had already seen the advisability of the plan, and he was not slow to act. Discovery seemed certain, but both he and his young ally passed quickly out of the door, and not a word told that they were discovered. Acting under the same impulse they dodged into a doorway, and just in time.

A covered carriage stood by the curbstone, and Bob Blunt was standing by it, looking up and down the street. He was plainly worried, but the fact that the block seemed absolutely clear at that moment reassured him. He turned around with a sigh of relief.

"All right, I guess," he muttered.

He re-entered the shop.

"Say, boss," persisted Ira, "w'ot is the plan?"

"There is but one thing to do," answered Lloyd, arriving at a decision. "We must balk this scheme, and it can be done only by showing ourselves. We will let them put their burden into the carriage, and then confront them."

"Ef that is the lay-out, we want ter hev' command o' the game."

Ira's actions proved what he meant, but Lloyd was annoyed when his ally ran forward, sprung to the box of the vehicle and took possession. Then he turned a triumphant face toward his older friend.

"Down!" commanded Lloyd. "They will notice you at once."

"Not much, by jing!"

So saying, Ira crouched down on the footrest and pulled the driver's blanket over him. He disappeared from view as a human being, but his most energetic cudgeling could not prevent an unsightly hump which might attract attention at once.

Before Lloyd could repeat his order there was a sound at the shop door, and the plotters emerged. They bore the mysterious bag, and staggered under their burden. Straight toward the carriage they moved, and Lloyd was free from immediate observation. Even Ira was safe, for they were as neglectful of the box as they were of the doorway—the bag gave them quite enough to look out for then.

Lloyd stood grimly. The odds were against him, but he intended to make himself known later, be the consequences what they might.

No time was lost by the other party, and their burden was hurried into the vehicle.

"Huh! I'm glad that's over!" exclaimed Bob Blunt.

"Driver," added Gus, "you remember my directions. Mount that seat and get away at once. I'll be in, Bob; I will follow."

"First time I ever rode in a hearse!" grumbled Bob.

"In, I say!"

The tramp was reluctant, but he put a foot on the step, and was about to obey the order when something unlooked for occurred. Hard by a dog had been worrying a cat, and as the latter saw a chance it suddenly shot across the street. The dog yelped sharply and followed, both shooting directly under the horse.

Instantly the horse gave a leap and forward plunge. Once, twice, three times he leaped forward.

"Whoa!" cried the driver.

It was plain horse talk, but the command was not heeded. The animal began to run and the driver dashed after him. Gus and Bob were slower to catch the situation, but the tramp finally found his tongue.

"Why, he's running away!"

It was late information, but it was true, and Bob and Gus took up the rear of a procession that made hot chase to catch the runaway. Lloyd was thus left alone and free to act. He could do nothing decisive, but he had enough of interest, and he ran after the rest. He saw the horse round the nearest corner, and then the three men disappeared at the same point.

Keeping up the pursuit, Lloyd reached the same place, and when he did so he saw the trio speeding down the block, but the horse and carriage had so gained on them that nothing more was to be seen.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the young man, "the animal has made good his escape and run off with Ira on the box."

He was right in this, and Ira was off on a strange adventure. The boy was still covered up in part, but he realized the situation, and was peering out under a corner of the blanket. The horse was making good use of his liberty, and steadily putting more ground between himself and his masters, and a backward look satisfied the passenger that they were permanently distanced.

"Wal, I'll be jiggered!" muttered Ira. "W'ot fer an episode is this? I'm monarch of all I survey, an' still I ain't got much power in my kingdom."

As the fact dawned more fully upon him that the legitimate driver could not catch up, he began to think of other things, and it became clear that he must do something to check his wild flight. Thus far no policeman had been encountered, but if one of the force caught sight of the outfit as it was then he would not let it go unseen, surely.

"Pondy, here is work fer you," added the boy. "You must turn Jehu an' stop this beast."

He threw off the blanket wholly and seized the reins. This did not at first do any good, but he began to try and act the part of a genuine driver.

"Whoa, there!" he coaxingly called. "Don't be scared; I ain't come down to a jog. Whoa! Pull up! Whoa! Darn yer old skin, you'll chuck me off an' brooze my shanks all ter mince-meat. Whoa! Good horse—good horse! Let up—whoa! Darn yer, I'd like ter lick the stuffin' out o' yer ugly hide!"

There was variety in his remarks, and that or something else had effect. The pace of the animal slackened, and, after

a few blocks more, he subsided into a gentle trot, soothed and calm.

This was something gained, but it occurred to Ira that he was in a peculiar situation.

"Wal, I've got command here, but I don't see w'ot I'm ter do next. Here I be with this rig, an' I've got a dead man in the inside. Say, what shall I do with him?"

Mixed with some concern, there was, for a time, a latent spirit of humor in Ira's view of the situation, but this soon disappeared. He had full control of the horse, and was guiding him where he would, but his movements were without system.

"By jing! I wish I had Lloyd here," he admitted, his face lengthening. "I don't know what ter do. I can't drive back an' let them crooks hev' the rig, an' I hev'n't got no helper, an' here I be with the dead man. Ef the perleeece git onter my curves, I shall git salted fer killin' of him. W'ot in blazes am I ter do, anyhow?"

CHAPTER XIV.

IRA'S REMARKABLE ADVENTURE.

Ira was really in a quandary. He not only had a team that did not belong to him, but there was a passenger inside whose presence was alarming. If he was found with the dead man in the carriage it meant sure arrest.

"Has my mother reared me with tenderness an' the touch o' the whip only ter see me sent ter Sing Sing?" muttered the boy, disconsolately. "I don't want no experience with prison cells, an' I must find some way out o' this. Say, there's a cop lookin' at me now! He's noticed that I'm a kid, an' wonderin' why I'm alone with this outfit."

Very likely this was a correct surmise, but Ira rallied to the emergency. He assumed a careless and unconcerned air, as if he owned horse, carriage and all of New York below the Harlem, and he passed the danger point without molestation.

"Whew! That was a close call, an' his eyes burned holes through the lap robe, he looked at me so hard. Narrer escape! Now, I can't keep this up; I've got ter do somethin'. I'll turn back an' see ef I can't meet Lloyd Pinckney. It would be jest the measly luck fer me ter run onter Gus Wayland an' his hopeful gang, instead, but I must risk it. Hey, old Skeesicks! Turn yer ugly nose t'other way!"

This was to the horse, and Ira reined him around to his liking. He retraced his steps, in part, and was soon near where the adventure had begun.

He did not dare to venture on the same block where he had acquired the horse, but he rode all round it, and rode without seeing Lloyd or any of the opposing party. When he had made the circuit he was still possessor of the rig, and just as bad off as ever. He kept it up resolutely, anxious to find Lloyd, and finally had the courage to go to the present home of the young man, alight, ring the bell and inquire for him.

He was told that Lloyd was not in, and had not been seen in several hours.

Ira went back to his team, mounted the box and drove on.

"By jing! I am in fer it!" he exclaimed. "I've got this measly outfit on my hands, an' it's worse than an elephant. Is it? Wal, I guess it is—jest let the perleeece drop ter the fact that I hev' a dead man inside an' where will Pandy be? Up the flume, by jing, an' booked fer a good 'leven years in Sing Sing!"

Keeping the horse going, but now moving aimlessly, he continued his remarkable journey.

"How would et work ef I was ter jump off an' desert the pesky thing?" he wondered. "It wouldn't take I. Pond, Esquire, long ter make his heels shootin' stars, you bet, an' it would be a mighty good man that could catch me. But, great ginger, here I've been driving about until all the cops hev' seen me. If I shake the outfit they will take charge of it, find the dead man, say sech an' sech a kid was the driver, and accuse me o'

murderin' the dead man inside. Great holy smoke! Either I hang ter this thing or I'll be arrested fer killin' the feller inside an' electrocuted, by jing!"

Ira was getting into a very uncomfortable frame of mind, and his dilemma was really serious. If he exaggerated a part of the danger it was not all groundless, and it was a grave question how he was going to get rid of the outfit he had acquired.

He became a sort of Wandering Jew and kept up his journey, fearful that if he stopped he would be subjected to more danger of inquiry than if he continued. Time and again he circled the blocks around the section where there was hope of seeing Lloyd, but nothing came of it.

"This hoss is gettin' jagged out," he finally remarked. "He steps as if he wanted less travel an' more bed. Ditto, me! Say, but this is a gallus situation—homeless in New York! Why, I'd envy a tramp! He hadn't no sech burden as I hev'. Ugh! Jest ter think o' wo't is inside! It makes me shiver clean ter my toes, by jing!"

There was a limit to his endurance, and as the necessity of doing something grew more marked, he tried anew to plan.

"In a little while more it will be so late that sight o' me with the rig is sure ter make cops suspect, an' then will come investigation. I must shake it before then. I dassen't leave it anywhere here, so I guess my way is ter jog up inter the goat destrict an' then skip out an' let the hoss go it alone."

He turned Harlem-ward, and rode on for two miles. He was proceeding leisurely through a quiet street, when he encountered a man, who hailed him.

"He-he-hello, driver!" was the call. "Stop, will yer?"

Ira looked hard. The man was swaying to and fro with the uncertain lurches that told of too much drink, and Ira's first impulse was to ignore him. But the stranger had more to say.

"Zis cab 'gaged? If it isn't, I want ter hire it. Want ter go home. Wanner rest—wanner sleep."

"You look as ef you needed it," agreed Ira.

"Mountain o' trouble. Wanner go home, an' legs won't carry me. Guess'm pretty full—legs ain't no good. Pile o' trouble—wanner gitter cab—yours 'gaged?"

Ira pulled up suddenly.

"No room inside," he replied, "but ef you feel like a ride up here with me, why jest climb up."

"Puffectly satisfactory—all I ask is rest fer legs—wanner go home."

Ira's sympathies had been aroused for another person who was in difficulty, and he had taken an abrupt notion to do the part of a Samaritan. When the unknown had climbed up laboriously, he looked him over and was not so well pleased. The man was decently dressed in clothes nearly new, and his hair and beard were carefully cropped, but he had a dissipated appearance, and gave out a strong odor of the fluid that had put him in such a state of leg-uncertainty.

"Good o' you ter do this," he rambled on. "Feel I hev' met a friend an' brother."

"Jest so, old hoss," responded Ira.

"Sannything I kin do fer you I'll do it freely."

"Maybe you kin, later."

Ira shut one eye and looked meditatively at vacaney. The notion had come to him to ship his rig onto this stranger, and let him get as much out of it as he could. The young driver had passed out of the vicinity where it seemed especially dangerous to desert the team, and he had no ambition to remain with it longer. He drove on for a few blocks and listened patiently while his passenger rambled on in maudlin style, and then he suddenly pulled up.

"I've got ter stop here fer a few seconds," he explained. "Want ter see a friend o' mine an' arrange about a fishin' trip ter Sandy Hook. You stay with

the rig, an' make yerself perfectly at home. Act as ef you owned the whole o' New York. See?"

"Ye-yes, I zee," stammered the stranger.

"All right. I'll be back as soon as I am ready. So-long!"

Ira had chosen a lonely block, and when he whisked around the corner he was sure nobody was observing him. At the corner, however, he paused and waited for developments.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed. "I ain't so badly inter it as I was. I've shook that rig, an' now the other feller has it. Wonder how he will like his find?"

A few minutes passed and the stranger grew uneasy. He was still in the mood of wanting to get home, probably, and it was lonesome sitting alone on the box. He moved restlessly and looking in the direction Ira had gone, but nothing came of it.

Presently he moved more to the point. Slowly, laboriously, and with some risk to himself, he climbed down from his seat.

"Going ter desert the outfit an' take ter his heels," decided Ira.

He was wrong. The drunken man turned, instead, to the interior of the carriage and opened the door.

"Say!" muttered Ira, breathlessly. "The fun begins."

The stranger lurched around the door, checking his first intention of entering the vehicle when he saw that there was a cargo aboard, but he was not so easily discouraged from accomplishing his purpose ultimately. He began to fumble around the place.

"Hold yer breath, Pandy!" murmured Ira. "There will be a smash-up sooner or later."

"Outch!"

The stranger suddenly cried out in alarm, and it was clear that he had made some sort of a discovery. The first cry was followed by others, none of which was coherent, but it was clear enough to Ira. Then came a new turn of events.

"A cop!" exclaimed the boy.

Unseen by either Ira or the drunken man, a policeman had been strolling down the block, and he now accosted the stranger sharply.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"By jing!" whispered Ira. "My passenger is in fer it now!"

He was in for it, as was shortly made manifest. The patrolman was suspicious from the first, and he held on to his prisoner with one hand and began to fumble inside the carriage with the other.

"He will find it," muttered the watcher.

Evidently this did happen, for the manner of the officer abruptly underwent a change. He turned sharply upon the drunken man and said something which Ira could only guess. It was a demand for an explanation, but neither by information nor mental condition was the stranger in condition to explain.

Ira stood on the corner and watched while an excited colloquy took place, the final result of which was not surprising to him. As a roundsman appeared on the scene, the drunken man was hustled into the carriage, much against his will, one of the officers went in with him, and the other mounted the box and drove toward the nearest station.

Ira first looked serious, and then grinned.

"Sorry I've got the feller inter trouble, but I wouldn't hev' been so if he had left whisk' alone. Good temperance sermon, but maybe he rather read his in the papers. Say, Pandy, you are out o' this shuttle—s'pose you gallop fer home?"

He carried out his plan and started southward. When he neared the place where the adventure was begun, he took a turn past Lloyd Pinckney's home, but there was no sign of the young man, and the lights were all out in the house.

Ira concluded to get to bed, and proceeded to do so.

"By jing," he murmured, as he lay on his pillow, "I guess the papers will be up on their elbows ter-morrer, an' sorter

howlin' mystery an' gore. Hi, hi, I'pondy! You are the only human who can fully explain it all. Will you do it? Not fer yer collar button!"

The next morning he was eager to get sight of a newspaper, and he was not disappointed in the result. With headlines of big type, the knights of the press exploited a thrilling mystery—a murdered man found in a cab—the murderer arrested on the spot—would not make any explanation, not even give his own name, and so on.

"Our reporter," added one of the papers, "has a promising clew, and the case may soon be cleared up, but, in the meanwhile, the police are wholly at fault, and they consider the mystery one of the greatest and strangest the force has ever grappled with."

CHAPTER XV.

A TURBULENT INTERVIEW.

Stephen Brown was a well-to-do citizen of New York, and until a very recent date he had all the appearance of a man who felt that life was worth living, and capable of yielding nothing but happiness. A change had come and he was morose, at times, but he had plenty of courage, and, though troubles had come, he generally looked, even after his perfect bliss fled, as if he could carry all the load he had.

On the same evening when Ira Pond was driving through the streets so aimlessly, Mr. Brown was seated in his parlor, reading his favorite newspaper and smoking a cigar.

There was a time when he smoked a pipe, and was too poor to think of anything better, but luck had come to him and business investments had placed money in abundance in his pocket.

His smoking was interrupted by the coming of a servant.

"People to see you, sir."

"Who?" asked Mr. Brown.

"One is Mr. Rockingham Dix, the missionary. The other is a lady."

"Who?"

"I don't know, sir, and they sent no names."

Of late Stephen Brown had grown wary of receiving ladies, but he meditated, reflected that the missionary ought to be a shield to him, and ended by saying:

"Let them come in!"

"Yes, sir," and the servant departed. Mr. Brown scowled.

"A woman to see me, eh? I don't like that—confound the women! A little while ago I would have said that the presence of Dix was proof that nothing could be wrong, but brother Jim says Dix sympathizes with her. He don't want him to bring her here—I'll send both of them flying. Now you bet high on that!"

The door opened and Rockingham Dix entered. Just behind him was somebody that made Brown's eyes glitter; it was Norma Rayne.

The missionary did not look any more as if a pleasant visit was in prospect than did the host. Mr. Dix was singularly pale, and his face had a drawn and pained expression, as if he was not in love with his business. He paused, and then, as Brown did not speak, opened the conversation himself.

"We have called on business, Mr. Brown."

"Is this girl with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if you have come to talk for her, you can get out as soon as you please; your room is better than your company."

It was plain talk—the sort that Stephen had learned in his earlier years, when he was in a circle of life where plain speech prevailed, but the missionary stood his ground.

"Pardon me, sir, but we would like a word with you."

"I won't hear you; I won't be dogged and raced by this confounded woman. Do you hear?"

"Quite well, sir, but the plan does not agree with our wishes. We have come to be heard."

Stephen wanted to get up and throw

them out, but he was not so headstrong that he had lost all sense of prudence. He feared that Norma could make trouble for him if she tried, and he consulted prudence and choked down his wrath.

"Drive ahead!" he growled, sullenly.

There was no invitation to sit down, so Mr. Dix calmly placed a chair for Norma, and, when she had occupied it, himself took one near her. Then he drew a long breath. It looked as if he was summoning courage for the ordeal of the hour.

Stephen scowled at Norma and said nothing.

"We are here with a desire for peace," finally spoke the missionary. "As I come with Miss Rayne, you will understand our errand."

"Blackmail!"
"Sir?" cried Norma.
"What else?"

"I have said I will not accept one dollar from you."

"Talk," sneered Brown.

"Pardon me," requested the missionary. "Let us be frank, and let the point be reached at once. Miss Rayne claims to be your daughter."

"Claims! The distinction is well made."

"As I understand the matter," pursued Mr. Dix, "she asserts that you married a Miss Lora Addington, and that she is the child of that marriage."

"All a lie!" cried Brown, hotly.

"She has the marriage certificate."

"I don't care if she has a whole library!"

"In your younger days," went on Mr. Dix, steadily, "you were a foreman with a contractor, to whose business you ultimately succeeded. When under your predecessor, you had occasion to superintend the tearing down of certain old buildings near the North River. Engaged thus, you made the acquaintance of Lora Addington. Isn't that true?"

"Yes."
"Thus far we agree."

"I do not deny the truth," declared Brown. "I admit that I knew Lora Addington."

"According to all reports the acquaintance ripened into love and marriage."

"All a confounded lie!"
"What of the certificate?"

"I don't know; I wish I did. I never saw it, or heard of it, until the girl here put in an appearance."

"Do you deny that it is genuine?"
"Yes."

"The marriage is recorded, also, in the Bureau of Vital Statistics."

"Why such a record should be there I can't say. I can only infer that it was placed there by my enemies."

"The record was made some twenty years ago."

"Yes."
"You assert that the claim of this lady is a conspiracy. Do you claim that the conspiracy was begun twenty years ago?"

"That can hardly be," admitted Brown.

"Then why try to make out that somebody else placed the marriage on record?"

"The only way that I can explain it is that somebody, through malice or a joke, had that record made then, and that these persons are taking advantage of the fact."

"Do you think the claim would hold good in law?"

"I don't know, and I don't care a rap!" cried Brown. "I only know that I never married Lora Addington, and that this girl is no kin of mine."

"She claims that she is. She claims she is your child and Lora's; that you tired of Lora and deserted her; that she died; that the child—your child and Lora's—was placed in the mission, and she is that child."

"It is all a lie!" hotly asserted the contractor, in his headlong way. "Hang it, Dix, this is infamous—the whole business is a lie and a conspiracy."

Brown thumped the table in a way which made it dance and rattle, and Mr. Dix sighed, as if he disliked to see anybody's feelings hurt by the progress of the inquiry. There was a momentary si-

lence, and then the missionary's voice rose almost plaintively.

"Can we do nothing to settle this, Mr. Brown?"

"Not a thing!"

"Consider the position of this young lady."

"Consider my position," snapped the contractor.

"She seeks only a name—"

"She can't have mine!"

"What of her proofs?"

"I will fight them in court, if need be. Dix, do you mean to fight her battle for her?—to try and force her upon me?"

Silence followed the question. Hermine Legrand had told Mr. Dix he would aid in forcing the claim, even when he knew it to be unjust. What would he answer now?

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE DARK.

Rockingham Dix grew more serious of expression, and the peculiar look of sadness deepened on his face. He did not hesitate with his reply, and it was pitched in his usual melodious voice.

"I trust," he non-committally answered, "that there will be no need of a battle. It seems to me that this matter should be adjusted without friction or trouble. Miss Rayne is emphatic in her statement that she does not want any money from you. All she seeks is a name—"

"She can't have mine! I'll have nothing to do with her—that's flat!"

"You refuse to recognize the claim, then?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"But the recorded marriage—"

"Coincidence or fraud."

"Is it not singular that either should exist thus?"

"That don't cut ice. I didn't marry the Addington girl, and this woman is not kin of mine."

"Do you intend to persist in this?"

"Yes; even in court of law—I'll die fighting it, and spend my last cent at it. New York is full of blackmailers and sharpers. Some of them succeed in netting their game. I know one that won't. I'll fight this to the end, by thunder!"

Stephen had waxed more violent than ever, and his big voice rose in a sort of roar. He had become quite purple in the face, too, and apoplexy seemed to hover near. He was angry, and anger took on the hue of the contractor's early life, when he mixed with the roughest class in his daily work. It was a turbulent outbreak in the full sense.

Just then Rockingham Dix saw only one thing clearly, and that was that he would waste words by arguing further. Stephen was inexorable as the laws of death. The missionary rose.

"Miss Rayne, I think we had better go," he remarked.

Brown gazed curiously at his male visitor.

"Are you going to fight this girl's battle for her?"

"I don't know what I shall do. Come, Miss Rayne."

Norma had risen when her friend did. All through this interview she had allowed Mr. Dix to do the talking. It was not because she was indifferent, but she lacked aggressiveness, and was glad to be free from the necessity of talking. Her heart throbbed painfully all the while, and her courage was not what should have been felt by one seeking as much as she was.

She moved toward the door silently now, while Brown suddenly turned his gaze upon her with curiosity expressed therein. He did not understand her, and the fact was apparent in his perplexed regard.

He was not given any light; the girl went out, and Mr. Dix followed her. Brown moved to the door and seemed anxious to say more, but the missionary had finished his remarks on business.

"Good-day," he said, in a matter-of-fact way.

Some sort of a growl, which was probably intended for a reply welled up from Brown's throat, and then the visitor

passed the outer door and the interview was over.

Mr. Dix and Norma walked a block in perfect silence. Then she stole a timid glance at him. His somber, sad face worried her.

"It has done no good," she sighed.

"Frankly, I do not think it has."

"He never will recognize me."

The missionary was silent.

"I dislike to go to law," added Norma.

"It is not a pleasant thing."

"Would you advise it?"

"Advise—what?" he replied, slowly.

"That I seek to make him do me justice by going to law."

Rockingham Dix gazed unsteadily at the speaker. He seemed to be pained and troubled, and his face was not so firm as usual.

"Suppose your claim is not correct?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"I only know what your papers tell."

"Hermione told me you regarded the evidence as complete."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"She may have been too enthusiastic."

"She assured me I was sure of your belief in my cause and of the rights I claim."

Mr. Dix passed his hand across his face as if there was some obstruction there. Perhaps he wanted to brush Hermione away, too, but Hermione was there, fixed and firm—the shadow of the case. He remembered her assertion to him that he would aid Norma in prosecuting the claim, though she had just admitted it was not just. Now it seemed she had gone further, and worked on Norma.

"I expressed to her my sympathy for you," he replied.

"Mr. Dix, don't you think I am Stephen Brown's daughter?" suddenly asked the girl.

He was silent, and Norma abruptly stopped and laid her hand on his arm.

"Be frank with me!" she implored. "My situation is a painful one. It would be painful for anybody; it is especially so for a girl—a shadow on her name is no serious matter. I want nothing but justice, but I want a name! Who was my mother? Who was my father?"

Mr. Dix's face trembled perceptibly. Norma was looking up at him, eager, grieved, sad of heart, and full of trustful leaning upon him. He was shaken as if by a tempest.

Who was her father? The father stood by her, anxious, agitated, wretched, yet loving. He could not command his voice—he shook his head.

"You doubt that Mr. Brown is anything to me?" she added, sadly.

"I did not say that."

"Your manner tells it."

"Why?"

"You are always outspoken, except—when you have something to conceal."

The missionary winced.

"That does not sound well," the girl added. "Pardon me; I only thought that you wanted to conceal a doubt in the justice of my claim. Perhaps there is a doubt. I have not your judgment, your strength of mind. I am weak—weak!"

Rockingham Dix suddenly raised his head. The chance remark went home. It occurred to him that, father though he was, and full of perplexity and sorrow, he was weak to stand there and act the part of a man of silence then. He roused; he grew outwardly firm; he took her hand in his; he spoke in the wonderful, melodious voice that had sounded so often in the homes of misery and sorrow.

"Do not be discouraged, my child. The Lord is not forgetful of you, and in this, the hour of your need, he has raised up a friend for you. I would not magnify my capabilities, but I have some experience with the affairs of life, and I am ready to do all I can for you."

"You are good; you are noble!" murmured Norma.

"I am only a man, erring, uncertain, sinful," protested Rockingham Dix, turning his striking face toward the cloud-capped sky. "You need help. I will try to give it. How? I know not, just now, but I

will think—I will see what I can do for you. If possible, you shall be happy. For now, come to your home. I will accompany you; walk with me."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRET POWER AGAIN.

Norma obeyed without comment; she did not feel like speaking to Mr. Dix when he was in his present mood. He was entirely different from any one she had ever met before, but she realized that there was a good deal in his mind without knowing what it was. His melancholy, his kindness—she almost thought there was tenderness, and she was right—subdued and almost frightened her, but it was the awe a young person may feel for an elder of supposed ability—she found nothing ominous in Rockingham Dix.

They walked quietly for several blocks, but as Zacheus Pinckney's house was nearly reached, the missionary suddenly turned to her.

"My child," he spoke, "do not be too hasty about this claim upon Stephen Brown. Give me time to see what can be done about it. I am anxious to help you, and I will do my best. Will you trust me?"

"Gladly—gladly!" she exclaimed.

"Do you think it safe?"

"I know it is!"

"Do you say this because I am a city missionary?"

"I had almost forgotten that, sir. No, that is not my reason; I say it because I can see all I mention myself; I can see that you are good and noble."

"I thank you."

Rockingham Dix's voice trembled and he bent his head a little toward the girl. Then he suddenly straightened up, and his tones became clear and firm.

"At least I will try to help you. Do not despair in this. You may be happy when the matter is settled. Wait as patiently as you can, and I will look around and work for you."

"I could ask no more, and you make me very happy. I thank you most heartily, sir."

They parted at the door, and Mr. Dix took his way homeward alone. As he went his face did not have the same mild, benevolent look that Black Block was accustomed to see upon it. The human part of him was aroused, and it showed itself outwardly.

Reaching the mission, he went at once to his private office. Closing the door, he sank into a chair, and something almost like a frown moved his brow.

"The most ignoble errand of my life," he murmured, resentfully. "I have been her agent in seeking to coerce Stephen Brown, and yet I knew he was not her father. Ignoble work!"

"Vile work!"

He meant all he said, and the fact hurt him deeply. He writhed under it like one under the lash, and all the more so because he had no assurance that he would not try it again.

Half an hour passed, and then he rose, went to a private desk and unlocked it. This done, he sought for certain papers—but he found them not.

"Have I misplaced them?" he wondered, uneasily. "They never have left this recess. But they are not there now. It is odd."

He was worried, but it was not until he had pulled the contents of the desk over several times that he fully admitted the real probability. Finally it was forced upon him beyond evasion.

"They are gone," he exclaimed.

Whatever he meant, the discovery worried and agitated him, and he stood with all of this expressed on his face. It was at this moment that the door opened and somebody entered. Mr. Dix turned, thinking it was the matron with some business errand, but the result surprised him.

Hermione Legrand was there.

She closed the door calmly and advanced toward him. Her gaze was first on him, but it strayed to the upheaved desk, and a smile stole over her face.

"Moving?" she asked, in a peculiar manner.

"How did you come here?" he inquired, speaking quicker than was his habit.

"My feet took me."

"Why didn't the matron announce you—"

"The good soul was not in the outer office, so I just took the liberty of walking in."

"It was a liberty," declared Rockingham Dix.

"Clearing out your old papers?" asked the woman, smiling.

He closed the cover to the desk suddenly.

"Since you are here you may as well sit down. I wish to speak with you. Norma and I have been to see Stephen Brown."

"I know it; I have since seen her."

"I am now done with this thing."

"How so?"

"I will not consent to act so despicable and dishonorable a part. We both know that Norma is not Brown's child—"

"But you will remember I told you that you would help her to secure him as a father. He is not that, in point of fact, but facts count for but little, if she can seem to prove a claim. She can do it, with your help, and you will help her."

"Woman, I will not!"

"Oh, yes, you will," Hermione replied, with her meaning smile. "Why, you have begun."

"I shall go no further. What! Force upon Mr. Brown a child that is not his? No, no!"

"So you back out?"

"I realize the terrible dishonor of the thing, and I will do no more. It would be infamous, mean, cowardly, and a sin in the sight of Heaven!"

Hermione's smile vanished, and her lips were compressed with an exhibition of inexorable will.

"Do you remember the threat with which I led you to make the visit?"

"Yes."

"I repeat it."

"Woman, I am going to defy it. I shall try to prove enough to clear the blackness away from the case."

"Prove it? Where is your proof?"

"I have none, but there is some corroborative evidence."

"Where?"

As if in reply, the missionary's gaze wandered to the desk, whereupon Hermione broke into a laugh which was triumphant and unpleasant.

"There?" she questioned, mockingly.

Rockingham Dix abruptly shifted his gaze back to her.

"What means the covert suggestiveness of your manner and words?" he demanded.

"I will be frank with you. The papers for which I infer you have been searching in yonder desk are now in my hands."

"In yours? How came they in yours?"

"That does not matter. Enough that I have them. You see, Mr. Dix, I feared I could not wholly trust you. You lacked proof of certain things, but you had some corroborative evidence. While you did have it, I was not sure of my grip. I am sure now, for, to be frank, I have stolen your papers."

"How did you get them?"

"Stole them!" coolly responded Hermione.

"You never did it. If you have secured them it was by the aid of somebody else. Has there been treachery in this mission? Is there a thief here? If so, who is it?"

Mr. Dix was plainly excited, but Hermione smiled serenely.

"I came in—"

"I deny it. You had a confederate. Who? What traitor, what thief have I in this building?" And the missionary grew more excited.

"Since you do not feel like believing that I took them in person, suppose we skip that part and look at another phase of the case. What change does it make, now I have the papers?"

"Well, what does it?"

Hermione leaned forward, and her eyes glittered unpleasantly as she replied in low, deep tones:

"You will continue to make demands

of Stephen Brown that he recognizne Norma as his child."

"When I know she is not his child? Never!"

"Then the whole truth will come out."

"Woman—you would not, you dare not do that!" cried Mr. Dix.

"Rockingham Dix, I am bound that Stephen Brown shall admit that Norma is his child. Nothing can turn me from my purpose. I want your aid, and I will have it. Refuse, and the whole truth will be told. How would you like that?"

"I do not expect you to have mercy on me, but for Norma's sake—"

"She must have Brown as her father," was the cold response.

"I implore you, have pity on her. Would you blast all her hopes, her future life?"

"Eloquent, tragic, able! Still, I see through the mask. The honored missionary speaks two words for himself to one for her. He does not want his reputation blasted, his honor smirched. Well, he can save himself; he will save himself. Once more, you will help me snare Stephen Brown. Take your choice between that and full exposure."

Rockingham Dix looked at his companion in silence. He was not of a tragic nature, despite the recent insinuation, and he did not indulge in heroics, but the barb was fully in the flesh. He was suffering mentally, and, worse yet, he felt helpless in the hands of the woman before him. His striking face was full of pathos, but it excited no pity with Hermione.

He was silent so long that she spoke again.

"Well?"

"It is not well," declared Mr. Dix. "It is an act of infamy you are trying to urge upon me."

"Call it infamy, if you will, for me to force upon Stephen Brown a child that is not his. Even at that my conscience does not trouble me a bit. I have no conscience. Now, Mr. Dix, you will help me in this."

"Would you degrade me?"

"I would have you coerce Brown, and you will do it. Dare you refuse? Are you not in my power?"

His head fell. He was silent.

Hermione brightened up, and she exclaimed, almost blithely:

"Things are going merrily. We will work shoulder to shoulder, and Brown will give his name to Norma. That is my plan, and you will aid me. I repeat it—you will aid me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

LLOYD MEETS WITH VIOLENCE.

It was evening, and Lloyd Pinckney and Ira Pond met at the street corner by appointment. They had seen each other during the forenoon and exchanged notes on their respective adventures with Gus Wayland and his party, but Ira was full of new things.

He grinned broadly as Lloyd came up.

"Seen the evening papers?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes," replied Lloyd.

"Them reporter fellers are at it fer keeps, ain't they?" chuckled the boy. "The papes is full o' it."

"Yes, and they don't seem to make much headway."

"I'm afraid the case would all fall through ef it wasn't fer the reporters. The police doctors say they can't find that the dead man died of any sort o' foul play, but the reporters won't hev et so. Not a bit of it! They declare it was some mysterious poison. Oh! jimmy, ain't et rich!"

"Singular that nobody has identified the dead man as the same who has figured once before."

"They are too hot on the scent ter be loggerkel. Say, though, ain't et a bit queer about my passenger o' that occasion?"

"He still refuses to give any information about himself, even keeping back his name?"

"Tell ye wot, Pinky, that feller is crooked, somehow. He wasn't a pretty figger as he set on the box with me, but I didn't think o' markin' him down as a corker. He is, though; he jest sets in his cell, an' won't tell the police who he is,

nor how he come by the body o' the deceased man."

"As to that, he was drunk when he was on the box with you, and it is likely, now he has sobered up, that he does not remember anything about his experience with you."

"That looks reasonable; but he is crooked, or else he wouldn't refuse ter tell his name."

"There is a mystery about him, surely, but the newspapers are making too much of it."

"The 'papes' always do."

"Well, I do not see that you and I need to worry about it. We can afford to let the police settle the case of the prisoner."

"Yes, an' we beat Gus Wayland out, an' snatched his dead man out o' his grip right smart. Gussie thought he had a dead sure graft, but he found he got it where Adam did the apple—in the neck."

Ira chuckled anew. He was very much amused over the whole affair, far more than he had been when he had the runaway team and was wandering around the streets with it, seeking to get rid of the thing.

He had not exaggerated when he spoke of the prisoner in the Tombs. The drunken man he had picked up was the sensation of the day in New York, and his persistent refusal to tell anything about himself seemed to justify all suspicions against him, so he was held for murdering the man found in the coach.

Lloyd suddenly dropped the subject.

"Any news?" he asked.

"No," admitted Ira.

"Have you been looking to Gus Wayland and his tribe?"

"As much as I could. Gussie has been hangin' around the saloon he loves so well, and Bob Blunt has been round ter see him. They had a good deal ter say, an' they sorter seemed troubled in their minds."

"Did you listen to their talk?"

"Couldn't make the rifle, boss. I tried it, but their position was dead against it. No, I ain't heerd nothin'."

"Do you think they suspect that the man the police found in the coach was their dead man?"

"Gus would be a fool ef he didn't, but I ain't no proof that he does. Wot seemed ter be gnawin' of them was the fact that they lost their plant so queer."

"They must know there was work against them."

"Sure."

"I wonder if they will get a clew to us?"

Lloyd had wondered the same thing a good many times during the day. They had deprived Gus of his dead man without much skill, but a good deal of luck, but Wayland could not know this, and he might do enough thinking to put him on the right track. Lloyd was a prominent figure in the case, and the blame must be put on somebody.

For a while Lloyd and his ally stood and talked of the affair, and then, as Ira was eager to make new discoveries, they took a turn around the vicinity to see if they could locate Wayland or Bob Blunt. Neither was visible, and they had their labor for nothing.

Finally the older investigator tired of it.

"I am going home," he announced, "and I'll leave you here. If you want to call around and see me to-morrow you can, though I will not promise to give you anything to do."

"I'll call, whether there is or not. So long, old man; don't let no body-snatchers ketch you afore you sight Zach Pinckney's mansion."

This was a joke, and Ira grinned in self-appreciation of it and went his way.

"Pinky wanted ter shake me," he muttered, "an' et don't jest suit me, but he seemed melancholy, an' I s'pose he wanted ter be alone."

The boy had exactly guessed the condition of affairs. Lloyd was not in mood to have anybody with him. A few hours before he had received trustworthy tidings that James Brown, the Police Special, was very active in seeking to get evidence against Norma, and the whole affair was worrying the young man.

He knew there were whispers against him for harboring Norma when James Brown was spreading rumors to her injury, in connection with the fate of Ezra Pinckney. People were saying that Lloyd cared nothing for his father's memory, and it hurt him.

He loved his father's memory—but he also loved Norma, and had faith in her.

Relieved of Ira's presence, he walked on without the least notion of where he was going. His head was lowered, and he was so deep in thought that he saw none of the other pedestrians who passed him, nor could he have told if any did go by.

He was to be violently awakened, however.

He was moving along, as before noted, when, suddenly an arm was thrown around his neck. He had the alertness of a native New Yorker, and he raised his head quickly—yet not quick enough for any good. Other arms seemed to appear in abundance, and he was dragged to one side. An alley was there.

Not tamely did he submit to all this. He was being dragged along the alley, but progress was slow on account of his struggles; he was bothering all of the force opposed to him.

"Keep his mouth closed up," directed one of the party.

"He can't yell while I hev my flippers onter him," replied a second person.

"Hang it! He's as strong as Sandow!" growled a third struggler.

The alley was narrow enough so that Lloyd could get an occasional hold on the sides, and he kept up the resistance.

"Say!" suddenly cried a disgusted captor, "this don't pay. Why not silence him here, as well as in the court? Hit him with the club!"

"Give it to me!"

"Hit him square on the head!"

Lloyd did not miss these comments, and as he felt the men loosen their grasp a little, in their zeal to advise the man with the club, he realized that his chance had come.

Abruptly exerting all of his strength, he broke the hostile hold. Just then he saw the club go up, and he knew only quick action could save him. He suited the action to the idea. With one swift, swinging motion, he caught the club man under the chin with his fist and knocked him off his feet. Then he made a move to rush out of the alley, but he met only solid bulk—he failed to pass.

"Head him off!" was the general cry. Lloyd put his back to the wall and faced them all.

"Keep off!" he cautioned. "I am not the passive victim you take me to be, and I will not be mastered tamely. Keep off, or you will suffer for it."

"At him!" roared a voice from the ground, where he of the club had gone down, and he was to be seen scrambling up.

The rest of the party were by no means reluctant, and there was a forward rush. They swept upon Lloyd as if expecting to brush him off the face of the earth.

In this emergency he was singularly cool, and he sent out blow after blow with good aim. One man he neatly felled, and the rest became mixed up in a jumble, getting blows from his sturdy arm and giving the same sort until it was hard to tell how the fight was going.

All the while Lloyd had one idea fixed in his mind. He was outnumbered and could not keep up this unequal struggle as he was situated, but if he could get the club, which seemed to have been forgotten, it would be different.

He felt for the weapon with his feet, lacking other means, and he finally found it. The next thing was to get it in his hands. To do this he watched long and carefully, and the opportunity finally came.

He stooped during a lull; he gained the coveted article; he swung it fiercely and rained blows on the enemy. They fell back from the assault, dismayed; they fled, and he had the alley to himself.

Then came a flash of light; a door opened just beside him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE APOSTLE OF MEEKNESS.

Lloyd was breathing heavily from his exertions, but congratulated himself on his success in clearing a way, when the door opened. The light, flashing so suddenly in his eyes, blinded him partially for a moment, but he saw a man just beyond the threshold.

"Have you got him fast?" asked this person.

Lloyd brushed his hand across his eyes and his vision grew more perfect; he saw clearly. A singular pause followed, and both men looked in a species of fascination, it would seem.

Perhaps it was the sight of a man standing there with a club in his hand that fascinated the second person—and perhaps it was not that—but to Lloyd the discovery meant more.

He recognized Jones Laken, of the mission.

Jones Laken it was, but Mr. Laken was not in his usual self-possessed mood. He appeared to have lost the power of speech, and he merely stood and gazed blankly at his neighbor.

Lloyd recovered his wits, somewhat.

"You, here?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," answered Jones, but his voice was strikingly feeble.

"What are you doing?"

"I—I was just—"

Something more was muttered, but the words ceased to be audible and speech ended in a rumble that told nothing.

The man with the club grew suspicious. He never had liked Jones Laken, and it was the most natural thing in the world to suspect him now. Lloyd did more; he grew angry, and felt like thumping the mission-worker with the club.

"Were you in this affair?" he demanded, warmly.

"In—in what affair, sir?" mildly, yet confusedly, inquired Jones. "I fail to comprehend."

"Where are your allies?"

"At the mission, sir."

"Nonsense! You shall not evade me thus. So you, a meek laborer in the fold of lost lambs, are only a common cut-throat? You don't look it casually, but I can see under the gloss of the surface."

"Dear me, sir," responded Jones, with real or simulated surprise, "I don't know the least thing what you are talking about. I am here on mission work—"

"To whom?"

"A sick woman in here—"

"I will go to see her."

"Oh! but she is not able; she is very, very ill, sir."

"Jones, I always thought you an unmitigated knave, and now I know it. You set those ruffians upon me!"

"I, sir, I? I know not to whom you refer, but, in any case, you wrong me, Mr. Pinckney. Have you had trouble? I am sorry for you, sir."

Jones kept his old meek expression, but he sent a swift glance up and down the alley, which belied his words. Lloyd was not to be changed in his opinion, and that was that Jones was in league with the late assailants.

"Why," he inquired, "did you ask, after opening the door, if your friends had 'got him fast'? If that didn't refer to me, what did it mean? You looked out, thinking to see your allies; that was the sum and substance of it all."

"No, no; oh, no, sir."

"Nonsense! A very plausible lie may succeed with me; a transparent one will not. Are you going home, Jones?"

"Ahem! Ah! Well, I am done with my patient, inside, and I was going. Do you mean that you—ah!—invite me to accompany you?"

"Yes."

"Mayhap it will be well that I go in your company. I am well known here, and if you have had trouble with rough men my presence will be a safeguard to you."

"You look the protector to perfection," grimly answered Lloyd, nodding. "Yes, I want your company."

"Drop the piece of wood you hold—"

"No, I'll carry it."

"Not in the street?"

"Yes."

Jones surveyed the club with a troubled air, but he saw fit to accept the situation. "It will be very eccentric, but it does not matter materially, I dare say. Yes, we will go together."

The mission worker closed the door and stepped into the alley. He seemed to feel perfect confidence in his safety, and he was not wrong in his opinion of Lloyd, though the latter would have taken much pleasure in using the club on his companion.

They passed out of the alley. Lloyd had expected to see some of his assailants loitering near, but they had disappeared entirely, it seemed. Possibly other alleys near had swallowed them up and afforded chances for covert watching, but they did not appear to molest the young man further.

Club in hand, Lloyd walked on by Laken's side, and thus they passed out of the vicinity.

Jones had not lost his calmness, and he spoke in low, soft tones of mission work as if he had no other thought in the world. He was allowed to do this freely, and to do all of the talking, but he had not bettered his standing by taking the subject.

Not until they neared the mission did Lloyd break his silence. Then he suddenly tossed the club away and turned upon his fellow pedestrian sharply.

"What do you know about this affair?" he asked.

"Your trouble in the alley—"

"I had forgotten that. I refer to something of more importance. You claim that my father told you he had found something against certain ladies—"

"Hermione Legrand and Norma Rayne," gently reminded Jones.

"Yes. Laken, did you lie?"

"Lie, sir—lie?" murmured Jones.

"Dear me!"

"Answer!"

"You are dreadfully violent, Mr. Pinckney. Those who avoid severity and turbulence have a good deal to endure in this world, but I will try to be patient. Mr. Pinckney, I told only the truth. Your honored sire did tell me just what I have stated. He said he had learned enough to send the women packing, sir—such was his expression, and I dare say he was to be believed."

Lloyd ignored the insinuation.

"About which woman had he learned so much?"

"I inferred it was Miss Norma Rayne."

"Why did you infer that?"

"Hem! Well, he did not mention the other lady."

"What did he say of Miss Rayne?"

"Only that he was disappointed in her, sir."

"No more?"

"No, sir."

"What about the trouble he had with them, that evening?"

"All true, sir, I think. The servant heard it. She has since kept very still, but it is prudence, sir."

"You must mean Maggie Connor. I know where she is. Come with me to her."

"Willingly, Mr. Pinckney."

Lloyd had not expected so easy a time, but he did not let the success go unmentioned, and led the way. The servant under discussion had declared to all who had talked with her that she had heard no quarrel in the house, baffling James Brown and pleasing Lloyd, who was eager to believe her statements. Now he desired to confront her with Jones and put the latter's claim to the test.

The hour was not by any means seasonable for a call, but they found the girl at her brother's, where she had been since the Pinckney fire, and they were soon in her presence.

She surveyed the callers with an air which would have told an unprejudiced person that she was troubled. Lloyd was not long in coming to the point.

"Maggie," he began, abruptly, "what do you know about a quarrel in the house the night of the fire?"

"Nothing, sir," was the ready response.

"You have said that before?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you stick to it?"

Her gaze wandered to Jones Laken, and then she closed her lips tightly for a moment, preparatory to replying.

"I stick to it," she doggedly answered.

"This person says you are wrong."

"I am not!"

"Dear me! Dear me!" expostulated Jones. "Didn't you say to me all I have alleged? Didn't you say that there was a quarrel between Mr. Ezra Pinckney and the women?"

"No!" Maggie asserted.

"Listen to me," interrupted Lloyd. "We want the truth of this. You are not now in the presence of an officer, and you need have no fear. Of all persons I need the facts most; I want them. Do not fear to speak. Did, or did not, my father quarrel with the ladies?"

He asked the question with all possible faith that it would be answered in the negative, and he was the more decided in his way because he felt that faith, and felt that he could safely urge candor on the girl's part.

The response was not to his liking.

"Well, sir, since you put it that way," replied Maggie, "the quarrel did take place!"

"What?" gasped Lloyd.

"I told this man so, and it was true. Your father quarreled with them, and I heard him speak very violent to them, too!"

Jones turned his eyes upon Lloyd. His expression was as mild as ever, with no trace of petty triumph, but if Lloyd's crestfallen look did not give him satisfaction he was more than human.

"I don't know," added Maggie, "which one he quarreled with—it may have been both or either—but quarrel they did, and he was loud and angry about it."

"Did you not hear any distinct words?" asked Jones.

"Not one."

"No more clew?"

"No."

Jones turned to Lloyd, as if to give the case into his hands, but Lloyd had heard enough. He had not one question to ask.

CHAPTER XX.

THE POLICE SPECIAL'S BOMBSHELL.

The door-bell of the Pinckney residence rang. Hermione Legrand and Norma Rayne were in their private room, and the latter started nervously. Hermione looked at her with some asperity.

"What is the trouble?" inquired the older woman.

"I don't know," replied Norma, with a sigh. "Little things give me a start."

"All nonsense," declared Hermione. "You should not let your nerves run away with you."

"But I can't help thinking of James Brown and his campaign against us. I live in constant dread lest he seek to serve that warrant again!"

"Pshaw!" brusquely returned Hermione. "I defy James Brown and all of his arts against—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," directed Hermione.

The door opened; a servant appeared.

"A gentleman to see you. He gave the name of James Brown."

"Oh!" gasped Norma.

Hermione remained cool as ever.

"I will send a few pennies down to him—. Well, possibly I will see him," she added. "He and I are interested in temperance work. Norma, my love, I will return to you shortly—"

"He asked for both of you," explained the servant.

"I shall be quite enough. Just because Jimmy and I seek to uproot the demon of intemperance in New York, it is no reason why he should get too forward in his demands. Norma, love, await my return."

The coolness of the woman was superb, and it seemed to be all the stronger because she knew a battle was before her.

Norma was frightened, and would have craved comfort, but her older companion swept out of the room. Straight to the parlor she went, and there Detective James Brown awaited her.

The Police Special's face was grim and forbidding, but this did not daunt Hermione. Smiling serenely, she advanced upon him with outstretched hand.

"My dear Mr. Brown, I am delighted to see you," she asserted, cordially.

James was astonished, and in his surprise he almost took her hand. Recollecting himself in time, he drew back, but this did not worry her.

"I am dreadfully glad you have dropped in," she continued. "I was wondering what had become of you."

"Don't fret," growled Brown. "I shall not get lost."

"Bless me, I hope not."

"You do, eh?"

"Yes, of course."

"Keep your tears back," sarcastically advised Brown. "You can as easily shake death as me."

"Ha! ha! You are mirthful, Mr. Brown."

"Let us to business. Do you see this?"

He drew a paper from his pocket, and Hermione gazed at it coolly.

"Yes, I see it," she admitted.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Why, that warrant, of course. Do tell me, Mr. Brown, if you are still wandering about the streets, trying to find somebody to serve it on?"

The Police Special flushed deeply. There was sarcasm in her words and manner, and he somehow felt that it was not misapplied. He did not like the shot, and he grew angry.

"I am not wandering about the streets," he retorted. "I am here, and right here I am going to serve the paper."

"Oh! dear me! On whom, pray?"

"Miss Norma Rayne."

"Still harping on her. Mr. Brown, you amaze me. You are somehow connected with the police, aren't you?"

Hermione assumed an air of ignorance, and Brown grew angrier than ever. He shook the inoffensive paper savagely.

"That will tell you; it will tell all. Now, woman, come down off your high horse. I have not brought this document here again without good cause. I have been learning something about my game. Did you ever hear of Daisy Delflora?"

For a moment Hermione's bold front suffered a relapse, but she was quickly herself.

"Never!"

"You were she."

"And who the Dickens was she?" inquired Hermione, blithely.

"An adventuress, a schemer, an ally of criminals, a bunco-steerer's decoy, a counterfeiter's associate in his work."

"Is that all? What becomes of the other offensive nouns in the English language?"

"Madam, you can sneer to your heart's content, but you cannot overthrow my evidence," exclaimed Brown. "You are Daisy Delflora, and your record convicts you."

"I tell you I never even heard of Flora Del-what's-her-name, but if it will please you at all, let us admit I am she, and, also, Lucretia Borgia—another wronged woman, according to modern historians, poor dear—and then allow me to ask what all this has to do with your warrant?"

"You were the woman named; a woman of ill-favored life. More, your companion, in at least a part of your career, was this Norma Rayne. More, it was this knowledge that came to Ezra Pinckney; that caused the quarrel he had with you, and made him declare he had learned enough of you to send you packing—by this I mean you and the Rayne girl."

"A bit incoherent, but don't let us mind that."

"I can be clear enough. My hand has been held off because I was told that you had no motive for killing Ezra Pinckney—"

"True!"

"You met him on the steamer from Mexico to New York, and he took a fancy to Norma and gave her a home. Having a home, you would not wish to injure your host—"

"Well argued."

"But when he found out just who you were, then you struck for revenge or safety."

"Wretchedly argued!"

"I am no longer placed in the position of a man seeking to arrest a woman for a crime where he could give no reason for her doing the deed. Ezra Pinckney met you on the boat; you told a pretty tale, I doubt not, and he believed you respectable people, so he took you in as guests. I now believe he was going to have you arrested, and that you killed him to prevent it. You struck for safety."

"Well?"

"I am here to arrest both of you."

"Why arrest Norma?"

"Why arrest one and let the other go?"

"She is not Daisy What's-her-name."

"She is your companion."

"She never harmed a person in her life."

"A judge and jury will decide as to that."

"Mr. Brown, I am not that Daisy you mentioned. Let us speak calmly of this—"

"I will waste no more words with you. I am not here to try you in court, but to arrest you. Bring on Miss Norma; I want you both."

"Better see Rockingham Dix."

"Confound the fellow! No, I will not. He works the wrong way—against me. I'll see nobody; I'll argue with nobody. Get ready to go with me."

James Brown, detective, felt that he had said all that his dignity would allow, and he began to get cranky. He spoke with sharpness, and made an imperious motion. Hermione looked at the warrant, and felt that this was no joking affair.

The Police Special noticed her change of manner, and, though he was not naturally of a vindictive nature, he could not help exulting over what he regarded as the result of his long efforts.

"You may as well yield," he added. "You are cornered."

Hermione raised her head with a flash of her eye which boded no good. The sarcastic mood was all gone, and she was earnest and full of venom and fight.

"Brown," she returned, "do you mean to arrest Norma?"

"Yes; and you."

"I don't care a rap for myself, but that girl shall not be used unjustly by you or anybody else. Let her go!"

"No!"

"Take me—"

"I want her most."

"Just because of her claim on your brother."

"Frankly, yes."

"Coward!"

"I am not that!" cried Brown, forcibly. "I am not mean or revengeful, but when I see sharpers seeking to bleed my brother I'll fight for him. Stephen Brown shall not be victimized—Norma Rayne goes to prison."

"Drop it, Brown."

"No!"

"Then listen to me. If you spring your trap, I will spring mine. Dare to arrest Norma, and I'll lodge Stephen Brown in jail for bigamy. His present wife has no claim on him—the first wife still lives, and if you meddle with us, your brother goes to jail for bigamy!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DETECTIVE IS ASTONISHED.

Hermione shot forth the words venomously. She sat like a waiting panther, leaning forward, but her manner was all fight and no surrender. The force and outward candor of her declaration staggered the detective for a moment, but he was quickly over the shock.

"Ridiculous!" he exclaimed.

"So you doubt me?"

"You are bluffing."

"Do you think I am fool enough to make this declaration all for nothing?"

"Exactly what I do think, and it will not move me in the least, nor save you from arrest."

"Good! I like plain talk, and you speak right to the point. Now, hear me! Thus far, in dealing with Stephen Brown,

I have been very easy. All I asked of him was that he would admit that Norma was his daughter, and I did not seek to humiliate him or anybody else, but you have forced me to decisive action. If this is a fight, you will find me ready for it. I charge your brother with bigamy."

"Do you mean to supply him with a third wife?"

"His first was Lora Addington. I never have demurred against the assertion that she was dead—I am a woman, and so is Stephen Brown's present so-called wife—but now I'll say that Lora Addington Brown still lives!"

"Ridiculous!"

"She can be produced in a short time, if necessary, though she is out of the city."

"I thought so," retorted Brown, recovering enough to sneer.

"But a witness to the marriage is not out of the city; she is here; I will at once take you to her, if you wish."

"A witness to the marriage—the marriage of my brother and Lora Addington?"

"Yes."

"If there is such a person, why hasn't she been produced before, when you are seeking so hard to prove a marriage?"

"The witness was not needed; we had ample evidence without her."

The detective sprang to his feet.

"Take me to this person."

Hermione promptly rose.

"I will. Come!"

Brown thought she was "bluffing," and he started for the door, but she kept by his side, and he stopped short, a new suspicion in his mind.

"This is a device to get me away, so the Rayne girl can slip out of the house!" he exclaimed. "I will test you—take me to this witness of yours."

"Come!"

It was settled, and they left the house together. Hermione had an alert and business air that did not please Brown, but he still clung to the frail hope that she was trying to beat him by means of a mythical witness. He would not weaken, and he found that she did not. His last hope fled when she walked up the stoop of a house and pulled the bell. The locality was plain, but respectable.

"Is your party in here?" asked the detective, slowly.

"Yes."

Not another word was spoken, and in a short time the ring was answered. Hermione quietly addressed the servant who came.

"Tell Mrs. Gildern that I have need of her help, and would like to see her," spoke the detective's companion.

The girl went on the mission. There was brief delay, and then they were told that they could see Mrs. Gildern. Hermione led the way to a room close at hand, and as they passed the door, Brown saw a lady lying on a bed.

She was an invalid—that was perceptible in all ways, and the headstrong Special found himself quieted a little. She was far from young, wasted of face and pale from sickness. Even to Brown this meant something, and as he marked the look of genuine goodness she bore, he unconsciously moved with light steps and subdued air.

"Mrs. Gildern," began Hermione, "allow me to introduce Mr. James Brown."

"Madam," awkwardly remarked James, "I am pleased to see you."

Perhaps there was a slight coming of color to the pale face, and the eyes certainly enlarged a bit, but Mrs. Gildern remained calm outwardly.

"I will not presume to say that you gain anything by it, for I am a hermit to the world. Still, I trust I shall not bring gloom to the time you vouchsafe me," answered the sick woman.

"Assuredly not," declared Brown.

"Mrs. Gildern," pursued Hermione, briskly, "we need waste no time. We all know why we are here. This is James Brown, detective. As I have foreseen, he wants to know more about the marriage of his brother Stephen to Lora Addington—"

"Excuse me," interrupted James. "Alleged marriage suits me better."

"Well, have your own way. Mrs. Gildern, what do you know about it?"

The invalid looked straight at Brown.

"I was a witness to the ceremony," she distinctly stated.

"You—were!" ejaculated the detective.

"Yes."

"To the—a—what ceremony?"

"The marriage of Stephen Brown and Lora Addington."

Hermione smiled maliciously, but remained silent. She enjoyed the perturbed expression on the Special's face, and knew he had been hit hard.

"Isn't there some mistake?" he inquired, slowly.

"No," was the quiet answer.

"You assert that you saw Stephen Brown married to Lora Addington?"

"Yes, sir."

"By what chance?"

"It was not chance. At the request of Miss Addington I was there as a regular witness, and consequently saw all I state."

"But Stephen Brown denies that he ever married the woman."

"I do not know anything about that."

"Was this all in New York?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know both parties to the marriage?" demanded the detective, with sudden hope.

"I did, sir."

"And you claim there was a marriage?"

"I witnessed the marriage exactly as I have told you."

Again Hermione smiled maliciously. It did her good to look at the Police Special. His expression was full of wonder, uncertainty and dismay, but the dismay predominated. Mrs. Gildern had the appearance and manner of a person who would not stoop to falsehood or meanness, and Brown was not blind to these facts. He was astounded and thoroughly upset.

He allowed a long silence to break in upon them, and then weakly continued:

"Where is this Lora Addington now?"

"She is said to be dead, sir."

"All of which does not change the facts of the case," added Hermione.

It was a rare thing for James Brown to be seriously disturbed, but he was all of that now, and his talent for cross-questioning suddenly failed him. He felt that he wanted to be alone. He wanted to think, to turn over the evidence carefully. Beset with this feeling, and wholly upset by the claims he had heard, he allowed the interview to fizzle out lamentably, and it was not long before he told Hermione he was ready to go.

They went without definite settlement of the matter, and walked along the street together. He was silent, and Hermione, smiling covertly, now and then, did not break in on his musings.

A few blocks away he abruptly paused.

"I will leave you here," he announced.

"Very well, sir," she replied, meekly.

"You—a—you shall hear from me again."

It was not said viciously, or with the air of one making a threat, and Hermione was satisfied.

"Tamed!" she thought, triumphantly.

The detective left her so suddenly that she had time to say nothing on the subject, even had she so desired, but she did not.

"There will be no arrest to-day," she murmured, satisfied.

James Brown went home.

He flung himself into a chair there.

"I've got to think," he muttered, soberly. "I don't understand this. Has Stephen deceived me? Did he really marry that Addington woman? All this is amazing; I don't understand it. The case grows woefully complicated. What is the truth? What am I to do next?"

CHAPTER XXII.

WAYLAND WANTS TO BE A CHAMPION.

While Hermione was walking toward Mrs. Gildern's home, Norma was sitting alone in the Pinckney residence in a painful state of mind. Hermione had told her confidently that she could "manage" James Brown, but she had given no reasons for her faith, and it was not shared by Norma.

The latter was not a fighter. She might defend herself, or be capable of strong work when driven to it, but she lacked her older companion's firmness and aggressiveness. Now she expected nothing good to come of Hermione's efforts.

While she still awaited the result, she was told that a caller was in the parlor to see her. She read the name on the card, which was "Augustus Fitzpercy Wayland."

The name was familiar in an abbreviated form, but she did not feel pleasure to know that the owner wanted to see her. She had met Gus Wayland, and Hermione had favored him strongly, but it was not so with Norma.

"I suppose I can endure seeing him," she remarked, with a half sigh, so she went down to the parlor.

Wayland was there, clad in his best, and beaming with smiles. He rose and did more than his share of the greeting.

"My dear Miss Rayne," he exclaimed. "I am delighted to see you. I hope you have not thought I had forgotten you—I have been out of town."

The last statement was a fiction, but Gus never allowed trifles to trouble him.

"It has been some time since we met," admitted Norma, non-committally.

"Yes, that is true. But then, you see I have business to attend to, and affairs down in Wall street are topsy-turvy now. We brokers have to keep our eyes wide open and hustle when there is a rise or drop in the market—but, of course, you do not understand that. Let me drop shop. Miss Rayne, how go your personal affairs?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why, this miserable murder business. You see, I have heard the rumors—did you ever know of anything so ridiculous?"

"May I ask what rumors you mean?"

"Certainly, certainly. The confounded gossips do say you are connected with Ezra Pinckney's killing—such nonsense! Bah! They make me weary! Miss Rayne, I am going to turn detective in this case. What will you give me to prove your innocence?"

"I trust nobody thinks seriously that I am other than innocent. I surely am not guilty."

"Of course not; but the only way to silence rumor is prove it false. That is what I want to do. Let it be understood that I am dead sure that you are innocent—but what we want is proof. See?"

Gus was full of words, and he rattled on rapidly, trying to be overpoweringly agreeable, and falling as far short of it as one of his class generally does. Norma heard without showing any enthusiasm.

"Yes," she replied, "I understand."

"I am deeply interested in the case, for I feel an interest in you, Miss Rayne. I have no friend whose welfare is more to me."

Norma's face clouded.

"Our acquaintance, while short, has been warm," pursued Gus, "and I may venture—"

"Warm?" echoed Norma.

"Well, well, friendly, I may say."

"We have met but casually, yet we have not quarreled."

"I should say not!" exclaimed Augustus.

Norma did not like the drift of conversation, and she was about to make an effort to change the subject, but Wayland was too much in earnest to give her a chance, and he rattled on as before.

"Now I have made my position clear, let me say more. I don't go much on detectives, and their discoveries don't interest me, but this is my standpoint. I believe that with due patience I can discover the murderer of Ezra Pinckney—more, I have well-defined suspicions as to who the fellow is. Shall I nab him?—shall I clear up the mystery and clear you fully?"

"If you can do anything of the kind I shall surely regard it as a great favor."

"I think I can."

"Then do it, and I will thank you most heartily."

"Miss Rayne, I am a business man—Wall street is my field—and I always come right to the point. I doubt not that I can do this, but if I do, what will be my reward?"

"My gratitude."

"That has no market value, and we Wall street fellows are great on such things. Now, see here, Miss Rayne, it's like this. I'll do it if you will then accept me as your regular company."

"What?" cried Norma, surprised.

"Hang it all, I have a deep fancy for you; something akin to love, you know, and all that sort of thing. I want to see more of you—to take you around to theaters and the like—and if we continue to fancy each other, marry you in the end. See? Is it a go?"

"If I understand you, I fear it is not," answered Norma, less cordially.

"Why?"

"I certainly do not reciprocate your alleged fancy for me, nor do I care to go to the theaters. I am not in the mood for such things."

"Well, let me visit you, then."

"I fear even that is impossible, in the way you mean."

"Why, hang it, don't you like my style?" cried Wayland.

"I do not feel like talking of this. It is far from my taste at this time. Let us not speak of it further."

The high-roller scowled unamibly. He did not like to lose his coveted possession, and the rebuff touched his pride.

"Then you don't want the murderer found?" he curtly responded.

"Do you refuse to do it?"

"I'll do it only under one condition. If you accept me as your lover, all will be well. I can find this murderer, and I'll do it if you say you'll favor me."

"Mr. Wayland, I do not wish to give offense, but I am not able to make an affirmative reply. Your good-will I shall value in the present as in the past—"

"Well, by Jove! You won't have it for nothing!" asserted Gus, intemperately. "I like you, and I want you for my wife. If you say yes to me I will give you an unblemished reputation, for I can find that murderer of old Ezra Pinckney and never turn a hair. How is it?—do you agree?"

The speaker was excited, but Norma retained her firmness.

"Not at the price you name," she returned.

"Then you can go to prison for all of me! By Jove, I am done with you, and I won't waste any more words talking about it. Good day!"

He marched loftily and angrily toward the door. Once he looked back to see if she was weakening, but she was too much confused to use art, and she watched his progress in utter silence.

"I don't dally with any silly girl!" asserted Mr. Wayland, and he went out of the house, closing the door after him with more force than was necessary.

Then Norma grew frightened. She had refused to make terms with the high-roller because he was personally obnoxious to her, but when he took himself away in person he left fear behind him.

"What have I done?" cried the girl.

"Just right!"

The voice sounded at the door, and she turned and saw Lloyd Pinckney. He had entered so quietly that she had not heard him.

"Just right!" he repeated.

"Oh! Are you here, Mr. Pinckney?"

"Yes," answered Lloyd, "and I may as well say that I have been acting the listener. It is something I am not in the habit of doing, but when I entered the house I heard Wayland speaking in loud tones, and some of his words drifted out to me. I should have been more than human if I had not done as I did. I know most of what he has said to you."

"What do you think of it?" cried Norma.

"That Mr. Wayland is a dangerous man."

"But does he know what he claims?—can he find the murderer?"

"I am not sure but he can."

"Then why doesn't he?"

"Because Gus Wayland is a knave. I was tempted to rush into the room and confront him. He plainly declared that he could produce the real slayer of my father. The law wants a man who says that."

"Why?"

"If he knows and does not tell he is dangerous, to say the least, and there is strong reason to think he knows more of the affair than an innocent man should."

"Then have him arrested."

Lloyd shook his head and sat down. He had been excited, but was calmer now.

"He has said that he can tell all this. I am not surprised, but I am glad he has shown his hand so plainly. It confirms certain suspicions I have had before. Wayland is dangerous, too—dangerous to you and me."

"Why?"

"I have been set upon by thugs and an attempt made to kill or kidnap me. I have just learned that Gus Wayland headed the gang, with a certain Bob Blunt as his accessory. To-day Blunt carries marks of a club I used on them. Wayland knew I was dangerous to his aims, so he tried to remove me. He did not succeed. This man is of the worst element in New York. He wears costly clothes, but is all the more to be feared. Miss Rayne, you have rebuffed him. I warn you not to go abroad alone at night!"

"Would he do me injury?" asked Norma, uneasily.

"He is capable of anything. From this time on it is a fight between him on the one side and you and me on the other. You have refused to receive his attentions—rest assured he will strike against you in some way."

"You frighten me."

"And properly. Wayland has cast off the mask, so beware of him!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SEARCH FOR TOM ROSS.

When Lloyd had talked fully with Norma he went out of the room, and then, for the first time, noticed that a letter awaited his attention. The envelope bore writing which would not have made a teacher of penmanship wish to claim the workman as a graduate of his institute, and Lloyd smiled gravely as he briefly scanned it. Then he broke the seal and found this note:

"Dear Pinky—I hav' gotter klew. If we hissul we may be abble two nab Tom Ross, or gitter line on hiz whair A Bowts. This is rite from the kard. Meat mee this eve at ate O'Clock at the uzzul plais, if you wanter hunt fer T. Ross. Don't faill me. Respectably yours,

"MR. IRA POND."

The writer had taken a whole sheet to say this, for his letters were giants in the full sense of the word, but it was not hard to read his writing, and Lloyd quickly devoured it.

He returned the note to the envelope with a sharp motion.

"Rest assured, I won't fail you!" he murmured.

He had learned to have faith in Ira, and when the boy spoke so emphatically he did not hesitate as to his course. The alleged clew must be tested.

Acting on this belief, he took his way to the rendezvous at the appointed time and found Ira already there.

"Hullo, old man," was the boy's greeting. "Are we inter et?"

"Have you reliable information?"

"Straight tip."

"What is it?"

"When Tommy Ross hid et was Gus Wayland who took him off."

Gus denied all knowledge of his whereabouts when with Bob Blunt in Hive Keener's saloon."

"Gus ain't no fool."

"True. But what have you learned?"

"I've been hustlin' fer keeps, an' this I've found out. Right after the traggerdy Gussie found Tom Ross in a saloon, took

him out, tried ter sober him up an' then took him away."

"Where?"

"Dunno."

"Is there no clew?"

"Yes, an' right there hangs the tail o' the dorg, so ter speak. Gus hired a cab ter take him an' Tom up-town, an' all went well, fer they was landed accordin' ter agreement. There ain't no doubt that Gus got Tom inter a hidin' place."

"How did you learn this?"

"From cabby. All by chance, but I claim credit fer et just the same."

"Where is the cabman?"

"Cabby is waitin' fer us. I've hired him ter take us up there—you are ter pay him—an' he will try ter point out ter us where he seen Tommy escorted in by Gus. See?"

"Lead the way to your cabman. If this is as you think, we may be near the end of the trail. Lead on!"

Ira led. They were soon with the cabman, and after a short talk Lloyd was willing to admit that, unless the driver was very much mistaken, Ira was right in his opinions. The driver knew both Gus and Tom, and he did not waver in his account of the affair.

"I'm pretty sure I kin tell you just where I landed them jays, an' where I seen Wayland take Tom in. Tom had a jag on—but I needn't mention that; Tom always has a jag on. If he couldn't get 'mon' enough ter pay fer it he would borrow a jag off from somebody else."

Lloyd and Ira entered the cab and the driver drove them rapidly northward.

"Kinder nice," commented the boy. "I ain't had no carriage ride sence I drove that swiped rig around with the bothersome load inside. Oh! But that was a howlin' old night, Pinky."

"And the police are still wrestling with the mystery."

"An' their prisoner!" laughed Ira.

"That fellow is a genuine mystery, but we need not worry about him. We'll leave that to the newspaper reporters, who are still tearing their hair out in frantic attempts to learn who the prisoner is."

"Ha, ha! He behaved wal' when he was on the box with me, an' mebbe it wasn't jest right ter give the team over ter him an' get him yanked by the cops, but I couldn't stay with the thing an' git yanked."

Conversing thus, they made the journey, until the driver pulled up, sprang down, and opened the cab door.

"Here you are," he announced.

"And where is the house?"

"Right yonder—five-twelve."

"Did you see the door opened on that occasion?"

"Yes."

"Would you know the person who opened it?"

"I think so. It was a woman; I guess I'd know her again."

"If she denies having received such a guest we may want you to identify her; that's all. Now for the trial."

Lloyd thought it best not to make too imposing an appearance, so the driver, Ira and the cab were sent on a few yards and he went alone to the door. He rang, and a woman appeared. She looked fairly respectable, and the inquirer felt encouraged.

"Mr. Ross in?" he began, briskly.

"No such person lives here," she answered.

"I may have the wrong name, possibly. I refer to the man who came here about the middle of the month—on the seventeenth, I believe."

"Do you mean Mr. Thomas?"

"Maybe I do. That may be the name; you received him in company with a friend of his, but the friend went away."

"So has Mr. Thomas gone."

"I am sorry to hear that. Where did he go?"

"Just what I would like to know, and so would others. In fact, he seems to be very much wanted, but I haven't seen him in some days. Have you?"

"Never since he came here. Can anything have happened to him?"

"Perhaps so, but I am not shedding any tears about him. You may be a friend of his, but I'm not. Nobody naturally would be unless he was a doctor of Jim-Jams," was the blunt reply.

"Do you mean," asked Lloyd, assuming an air of surprise, "that Mr. Thomas drank heavily?"

"He was a perfect jag, sir."

"Indeed!"

"From the time that man came into this house he seemed bent on drinking up all the liquor in New York, and I guess he did make a big hole in the supply on hand. I never liked him very well, but he was backed up by a friend who had a good manner and plenty of money, and as the bargain was made in advance I didn't like to refuse to receive him when he showed up. I did take him in, but he was the most disreputable person I ever had under my roof."

"Well, what next?"

"He kept on with me a few days, and he kept on with the drink. I don't mean he was beastly drunk and making the house hideous, but he was just full all the time and no discount. Then he suddenly went out of sight."

"On what day?"

"Thursday."

"Did he take away his baggage?"

"Precious little he had, but he left it all. His board was paid ahead of that date, so I lost nothing by his going. He was the only loser—or possibly I may add the friend who took him here."

"I presume the friend has not been here?"

"But he has, several times."

"To inquire for Thomas?"

"Yes."

"Describe the friend."

She did so, and Lloyd had a fairly good picture of Gus Wayland.

"Then it seems his friend doesn't know where Thomas is."

"He don't, but he's hunting everywhere."

Lloyd remained in conversation for some time longer, but what he heard only emphasized the points he had already brought out. It seemed that Tom Ross had disappeared, and even Gus Wayland did not know where he was. The inference was that Tom's propensity for drink had led him to ignore the easy time he was having as Wayland's protege, and had taken him off on some unknown expedition.

When Lloyd left the landlady he went back to his companions and dismissed the driver. Then he reported to Ira, whose face lengthened perceptibly.

"We've got it where Adam got the apple—in the neck," remarked the boy, lugubriously.

"We're not beaten yet."

"I'm onter yer curvies."

"How so?"

"We would hev' rode home ef you hadn't some new plan in yer mental bread-pan."

"You are right. I do not intend to let Tom Ross slip so easily. It may be set down as a positive fact that we are on the right track, and it would be a pity to lose the game now. Tom was too full of drink for his own good all the while he was here. Then he must have patronized the saloons near here."

"An' you'll inquire?"

"Yes."

"Correck you are, Pinky. Do it, an' yer Uncle Dud will be yer backer. Sail in!"

In that region it was not hard to find a saloon, and to the nearest they went. Entering, Lloyd bought a few cigars and then opened proceedings.

"Do you know a man of the name of Thomas?" he asked, carelessly.

The barkeeper looked hard at the questioner.

"Say! If I was as much in demand as that jay I'd make 'mon' out of it!" he exclaimed.

"How so?"

"Why, somebody's in here all the time to see if I know what has become of that old soak. Say, I'm a barkeep, I know, but I don't pose as guardian for no soak!"

The speaker was wiping the bar.

He brought the cloth down with force to emphasize his remark, and then glanced toward the door as if hoping a customer would come in and relieve him of the inquisition. No one came, but he saw a man there who dodged out of sight promptly.

Lloyd and Ira saw nothing of this. Better for them would it have been if they had, perhaps. The man at the door was Bob Blunt.

CHAPTER XXIV. A DANGEROUS TRAIL.

Lloyd perceived that the barkeeper had become tired of the Tom Ross case, so he proceeded to smooth down his feathers as much as possible, and this he soon accomplished. When the dispenser of fluids grew amiable again, he condescended to be more explicit.

He told what he knew about the so-called Mr. Thomas.

This person had made his appearance at the saloon, an entire stranger, but this state of affairs did not last long. He hastened to make himself a familiar figure at the bar, and evidently tried to drink up all of the liquids kept by the house. If he did not succeed in this, he did keep himself more or less intoxicated while he patronized the place, and then he sank out of sight suddenly.

"One day he was in here a dozen times," added the narrator, "and with a lovely thirst every time, and then—puff!—and he was gone. I ain't seen hide nor hair of him since, but no sooner had he gone than his acquaintances began to pour in to ask about him—"

"Describe them," directed Lloyd.

"Well, there wasn't but two. They looked like this."

He told how they looked, and Lloyd thought he was sure of Gus Wayland having been one.

"Do you know if they have found Thomas?" added the questioner.

"They hadn't an hour ago."

"Oh! Have they been here this evening?"

"Yes; both were in; the sleek chap and his seedy companion. No, his jags hasn't been found. That's all I know about him."

So saying, the speaker turned away. A customer had come in, and the barkeeper seemed to prefer waiting on him to talking about an ex-customer.

"Say, Pinky," remarked Ira, "I guess we're at the end of our rope."

"We haven't got Tom Ross, anyhow."

"What thinks is there in yer head?"

"I infer that Tom has yielded wholly to his love for drink, and wandered off somewhere."

"Guess that's about the figger."

"Well, we need not linger here. Let's go home."

Lloyd spoke with some curtness, for the disappointment of the affair was great, and then turned toward the door. He and Ira went out of the saloon.

The street ahead of them appeared to be wholly deserted, and it had an unusually gloomy look to Lloyd. The gas flickered weakly, and the shadows lay deep along the sidewalks. All this he noticed because he was in a mood to be annoyed by trifles, but he saw no more.

"Poor Norma!"

It was the thought in his mind, and he was worried because his efforts were resulting in so little practical good to her. It seemed vitally necessary to find Tom Ross, and Tom had gone strangely out of sight.

Ira surveyed his companion's grave face silently for a while, and finally broke the pause by saying, in a tone more subdued than usual:

"The elevated is right down there. Shall we walk to it?"

"Yes."

Answering thus briefly, Lloyd set the example, and they began the journey. He did not lose his serious air, and Ira was sufficiently depressed thereby to lose his own wonted high spirits. Both walked with thoughtful faces and lowered heads.

They reached a block which made no

good appearance. Sidewalks and pavements were alike neglected and uneven, and for some distance a row of unsightly sheds extended along the side of the way. They did not know that there was any good reason why they should be interested in all this, but the sheds had a part to play.

There was a rustling sound in that quarter, and several men suddenly leaped out and confronted them. Lloyd, quick to foresee danger, raised his head, and then came a command from one of the other party:

"Surround them!"

A swift movement, and there was a circle around the two pedestrians. Their way was blocked, and by men who looked rough and evil enough for anything desperate.

"At them!"

This was a further command, and it was promptly obeyed. The party leaped at Lloyd and Ira as if operated by one set of muscles.

"Look out!" cried the boy, sharply.

He had seen a hand go up, holding a paving-stone, but Lloyd had seen it, too. The missile came whirling through the air and there was mischief in the cast, but Lloyd ducked agilely, and it passed over his head and fell clattering in the street.

"By jing! it is Gus Wayland!"

This further speech was from Ira, but Lloyd was not less observant. He had recognized the high-roller, and was thus made aware of the animus of the attack, while the discovery more than ever emphasized the need of action on his part.

There were four men opposed to him, and not another person was in sight.

He did not have an over-confidence in his abilities that made him believe he could cope with all of them, and it was equally certain that he could not run, so he did some quick thinking and decided on a plan.

Wayland was near him, seeking to get a chance at him, and Lloyd did not keep him in suspense.

Directly upon the leader Lloyd darted, and, avoiding a blow aimed at him, grappled with him. Another moment and he had forced Gus back against the nearest shed and gained a good hold upon him. Lloyd was muscular, and he felt that this was his one hope.

Temporarily mastering the high-roller by putting out all his strength, he managed to get his own back to the shed and hold Gus in front of him.

"Keep off!" he cried to the lesser villains. "Let me alone, or your chief suffers!"

"That's right, Pinky!" exclaimed Ira. "Don't hesitate ter use yer knife. Carve him all up, ef they don't keep off!"

Lloyd had no knife, and Ira did not think he had, but the boy was quick-witted enough to do his part to frighten the gang.

Wayland struggled stoutly, but Lloyd had succeeded in getting a good hold on him, and it was lost action.

"Confound it! let me go!" shouted the high-roller.

"Don't let us have any misunderstanding here," responded Lloyd, promptly. "You fellows may think you have the advantage of me, but you are mistaken. If you come near me, there will be somebody hurt."

It was well said, but the speaker's private opinion was that he would be the one to get hurt. He had no hope except to do his best to "bluff" the gang until help chanced along.

For a time he was successful. The lesser members of the gang were not the right sort to covet an open fight, and, as they could get at Lloyd only by facing him, they hesitated with cowardly fear.

Gus added another command to them, but, as they did not obey readily, the leader grew desperate. Like many other men of his class, he carried a revolver, and he turned his hand around to get the weapon from his hip pocket.

Lloyd immediately comprehended the movement, but he did not interfere at once. He let Wayland have ample chance, and the revolver came out in due time.

Then it was the opportunity desired, and Lloyd skillfully wrested the article away.

With a sudden movement he sent Gus reeling along the sidewalk, and then cocked the revolver and turned it on the gang.

"The man who comes this way gets shot!" he exclaimed, forcibly.

"By jing!" cried Ira, "that's the figger! Give 'em fits, Pinky, an' you kin depend on me ter pick up ther dead. Say, do you fellers want a muss awful bad? Ef you do, now is yer time. Wade in, gents!"

And the boy laughed scornfully in the face of all the party.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WIND-UP OF THE FIGHT.

A revolver is a wonderful factor in a fight. Its presence makes the weak the equal of the strong, and makes amends for the inequality of numbers. It was so then. The followers of the high-roller had been none too courageous before, and now that the weapon was turned upon them they fell back several paces with haste.

Gus Wayland recovered his balance and grew wild with rage as he took in the situation.

"Are you cowards?" he demanded, hotly. "Will you let one man hold you up? At him, I say!"

"Say, boss," put in the uncertain voice of Bob Blunt; "s'pose you lead the way."

"I will. Come, follow me, and we will smash that cur into small pieces. Come!"

"Stop!" ordered Lloyd, his utterance growing solemn and ominous. "I am not going to risk my life in a contest with you. If you advance, I shall shoot to kill. Keep off!"

The lesser lights of the combination had been looking up and down the block for some time with uneasiness, and one of them now expressed his opinion.

"Gents, this ain't no place for me. I may git married some day, an' a married man has no right ter resk his life. Besides, I've got an engagement, an' I'll leave you before a cop puts in an appearance. So long, gents!"

With this he turned and stalked down the street.

"I reckon," added a second man, "that I'd better make sure he keeps that engagement. Tra-la-la!" and he followed his associate.

"Hello!" suddenly cried Ira, "there comes a cop."

Gus Wayland looked up the block and saw brass buttons, and, deserted by his aids to such an extent, he followed in their steps, Bob Blunt keeping close to his heels.

This general flight left the two friends alone, and Ira indulged in a laugh.

"By jing! they all seem ter hav' engagements!" he exclaimed. "Must be they are in fer a feed at Del's."

Lloyd was not in such high spirits. He had been roughly used, and was correspondingly indignant, and if he had not discovered that the owner of the brass buttons was merely a harmless person in private uniform, he might have called for prompt procedure against his persistent foe. After a little uncertainty, he thrust the revolver into his pocket.

"We seem to have the best of it."

"Wal, I should hoop-la," agreed Ira. "We've got the cat an' the hide—what more could we ask for?"

"I object to those scoundrels devoting all their time to attacking me. This thing is about played out. I am going ahead in an orderly fashion, molesting nobody, and Gus Wayland is giving all his time to trying to do me up."

"Do you notice that he is makin' out much?"

"No."

"Then let him flicker."

"From this hour on he will find me ready to meet him at all times. He goes armed; so will I. He seeks a fight; he will find me ready. It's fight from this out."

"By jing! Pinky, you're a trump! I like your style. Don't take no sass from Gussie, but jest bump his nose an' heels together ef he comes around your way some more."

It was too serious a matter for Lloyd to look upon lightly. It was clear that Wayland intended to put him out of the case, and, as the high-roller had such a facility for attracting tools to his standard, he was dangerous.

Lloyd meant to be prepared for him thereafter.

Delaying no longer, the two friends took their way to a car and rode homeward. Lloyd reached the Pinckney house not in the best frame of mind, and he was rather disappointed when he found his uncle up and watching for him.

"I want to speak with you, Lloyd," announced the elder man.

The nephew looked at him closely. Zacheus Pinckney's face and tones were alike grave, and Lloyd went to the parlor with some misgivings. His uncle was very attentive in finding a chair for him.

"Now, my boy," he opened, "you will pardon me if I come to the point like the plain man I am. I wish to speak of your lady guests."

"What of them?" inquired Lloyd, in a low voice.

"Do you know there is adverse talk because we have housed them?"

"Meddlers will gossip."

"Well said, but sometimes meddlers have to be listened to. Let us hope this is not one of those cases, however. The ladies are here as your guests, and, as before intimated, there is comment among those who know us in consequence. Owing to circumstances, just or unjust, rumor connects them unpleasantly with the death of my brother—of your father."

"Unjustly, you may be sure."

"That's what I want to think myself," replied Zacheus Pinckney, heartily. "Norma Rayne is a most attractive girl, and it is hard to credit her with evil. I announce myself as her friend until we know harm of her."

Lloyd knew his uncle of old. He knew the kindness that was so much a part of Zacheus Pinckney's nature, and it had never been more fully displayed than now. Yet all of this troubled Lloyd. He knew something unpleasant was coming.

"Be explicit," he requested, uneasily.

"To-day, then, a lady came to me—Mrs. Marcase—who was one of your neighbors in your old home. You knew her, I think, and will admit that she would not knowingly do wrong to anybody."

"I think she would not."

"The object of her call was to say to me, privately, that on the night of poor Ezra's sad end, she saw two women pass from John Jacks's junk-shop to your father's house, entering by the rear door. An hour later the house was in flames."

"The women may have been servants," exclaimed Lloyd.

"True."

"Or did she claim to recognize them?"

"It was night; she did not recognize them."

"Then I do not see that we have any evidence in this," loyally declared Lloyd.

"There is no positive evidence. All we know is that two women passed into the house from the rear, and that the tragedy soon took place, but you will remember that Hermione Legrand refused to account for her whereabouts just previous to the fire."

"Norma was with Mrs. Gildern, the witness to the marriage of Stephen Brown and Lora Addington."

"So Norma says now, and I do not know that she speaks falsely, but she was not once so ready to account for her whereabouts at that hour."

"She was not ready to bring Mrs. Gildern forward to the public, so she disliked to say she was with that lady. However, Mrs. Gildern can prove she was there."

Lloyd showed signs of warmth now, and his uncle hastened to reply, pacifically:

"I am not accusing Miss Norma; I accuse nobody. To state my position quickly, I feel, however, that we should call on John Jacks at once, and see what he has to say about this. If the women passed through his shop he must know of it, for he seldom leaves the place. John Jacks may be able to clear our guests. Shall we see him?"

Lloyd hesitated. He wanted to suggest that he go alone to see the junk-dealer, but his courage was not quite equal to suggesting such a thing. Zacheus Pinckney was watching him closely, and he presently added, quietly:

"My brother, your father, has been murdered. What is our duty?"

Lloyd sprang to his feet.

"To avenge his death—to find the guilty! Ay, though it hits even myself, we must leave no stone unturned. Come!"

"To-morrow will do. The hour is late."

"John Jacks does not go to bed until very late. As for us, we cannot afford to do so until we have made an effort to settle this question."

"You shall have it your own way, my boy. I'll get ready at once. And, Lloyd, I sincerely trust that John Jacks will explain all this doubt away. I like Norma; she pleases me very much. I can't believe her guilty—yet, your father was my brother. Don't think hard of me."

Zacheus laid his hand on Lloyd's shoulder, and looked affectionately into his nephew's eyes.

"That I do not. I know your goodness of heart. We understand each other, Uncle Zacheus."

They prepared for the street and went out. It was not far to the junk-shop, and they were encouraged to apply by sight of a light burning inside. Lloyd applied his knuckles to the door and knocked. A pause followed.

"He does not come; he may be out," suggested Mr. Pinckney.

"Or asleep."

"Knock with more vigor."

The suggestion was obeyed, and Lloyd made the door shake when the second attempt failed. Four times he pounded the panel; then the door was abruptly opened. John Jacks stood before them.

"Have you gone crazy" curtly inquired the junk-dealer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JOHN JACKS.

John Jacks showed his usual calmness in certain ways, but he was plainly annoyed, despite this, and Lloyd thought he was somewhat flustered. He looked disapprovingly at the applicants.

"We beg your pardon, Mr. Jacks," replied Zacheus Pinckney, in his most urbane manner. "If we have disturbed you I apologize for it, but I wished to see you on business."

"I have nothing to sell, to-night."

"Nor do we wish to buy, but I should be glad to talk with you."

"It shows mighty poor judgment on your part, but you can come in."

The junk-dealer stepped back and the callers entered. John Jacks then went to a box, took out a pipe, and began filling it without another sign that he knew he had visitors.

Zacheus was a little confused by this reception, but he found his tongue presently.

"You know that one of your neighbors perished lately in his house."

John Jacks crammed down a supply of tobacco, added a few ashes from the last filling, lighted a match on his trousers, and puffed slowly at the pipe. His companions knew his reputation for eccentricity, and neither ventured to speak again during this lull. Six puffs John Jacks took, and then he replied, calmly:

"I've heard of it."

Zacheus was still more perplexed by this procedure, but he managed to find speech.

"Did you see the fire?"

"Don't remember," answered the smoker.

"Were you in your shop?"

"Don't remember."

"It was a very serious affair to us. Ezra Pinckney was my brother, and his death was a severe blow."

"Nobody has ter die but once," reminded the junk-dealer, coolly.

"Death is never a trifling matter, and when to that is added violence and crime—"

"Men have to die," interrupted John Jacks. "Ef they didn't there wouldn't

be room fer them who come after. Death is a good thing. Why, ef all the folks who has lived in New York was here now, where would we all live? There would be one city built right on top of another, an' folks would soon run the blamed thing up so high that the top story would be in the clouds. Good thing folks do die—we don't want to be crowded."

John Jacks did not advance these views in a curt way. He smoked serenely and seemed simply to be unloading the most commonplace facts.

"Surely," persisted Mr. Pinckney, feebly, "you don't approve of violence."

"There has ter be a variety in dyin'," reminded the junk-dealer between whiffs. "Ef all died the same way it would be monotonous. We want variety."

"But when murder is done it becomes atrocious."

"Some folks dislikes one thing, an' some another. Some dislikes heart disease, an' some lung fever, an' so on. Variety kinder mixes it up."

Lloyd had been willing to let his uncle manage the interview, but the stolidity of the grim smoker did not please him, and he liked his words even less. Now Lloyd broke in.

"Mr. Jacks, I have lived neighbor to you all my life. For the sake of this fact, if not for any other, will you answer me to the point? Do you know anything about the night when my father was killed?"

"Nothin'," replied John Jacks, calmly.

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

"No."

"Was any one in here, before or after the fire?"

"No."

"Did you have visitors?"

"No."

"No ladies?"

"No."

John Jacks's negatives were models of studied indifference, and their author smoked on and surveyed Lloyd serenely. He seemed unmoved and wholly at ease.

"A lady living near here has asserted that she saw two women leave your shop shortly before the fire and enter my father's house."

"Well, what of it?"

"Is it true?"

"No."

"Then why do you say what of it?"

"I meant, what of her lie."

"Mr. Jacks," diplomatically put in Zacheus Pinckney. "I trust you will not misunderstand us in this matter. We do not seek to cast blame on you, but, as brother and son, we wish to learn all we can about the night that Ezra Pinckney lost his life at the hands of an assassin. The mystery of his death is not solved, and we have heard that women were seen to pass from your shop to that house just before the fire broke out."

"Not correct," replied John Jacks, tersely.

"Were there no women here?"

"None."

"Might they not have been here unseen by you?"

"No."

"Then how do you account for the statement?"

"Somebody lied," explained the junk-dealer, calmly.

"Mr. Jacks, we should be glad to get at this mystery. We feel the death of our kinsman deeply—"

"It had to come; we all have ter die. Got ter make room fer others, else the earth would get crowded. It's a public favor when a man dies."

Lloyd flushed with anger under this speech, but his uncle gently pressed his arm, indicating a desire for prudence, and then answered John Jacks, quietly:

"Since you can tell us nothing we will no longer keep you from your bed, sir. We will bid you good evening, sir."

The junk-dealer muttered something which may or may not have been a response, but he did not lift his head or cease smoking as they moved toward the door. Zacheus Pinckney retained his self-possession well, and as they stood at the

threshold he made a matter-of-fact remark about the weather. Then they passed out to the street.

"The heartless knave!" exclaimed Lloyd. "I would like to go in and throttle him."

"Be calm, my boy."

"Do you remember how he spoke of my father?"

"Bear in mind that he is John Jacks. I have heard of his eccentricity, and we have seen it now. Better go light with him."

"Did he tell the truth or lie to us?"

"I don't know. Frankly, I got the impression that we were not learning all that John Jacks could tell, but he would not open his mouth for us. If he knows more it must be discovered by us in some other way."

"And Norma?" asked Lloyd, in a low voice. "What of her?"

Zacheus Pinckney walked several steps before replying. Presently he gave his decision.

"When I stopped you in the hall to-night I was going to suggest the advisability, in view of all the neighborhood's talk, of having the ladies go away to another home. Now, I am uncertain, and while I feel that way I shall not ask you to send them off. I would even advise that they stay if—if I liked Miss Hermione Legrand as well as I do Norma."

"Norma is not responsible for Hermione Legrand."

"I hope not. Pardon my frankness, but I have seen those I liked better than Hermione. However, let us drop all this to-night. Let it all rest for now—let us rest ourselves."

It was good advice, but when Lloyd was alone in his room he could not sleep. Zacheus Pinckney had been kindness personified, yet it worried Lloyd to know that his uncle had even considered the advisability of sending the two ladies away.

"Poor Norma," murmured Lloyd.

So much time was lost in getting to sleep that it was late before he woke in the morning. When he did he found a letter on the floor which had been thrust under the door by a servant. He broke the seal and found a printed article fastened to a sheet of paper. This was the article named:

"A reward of fifty dollars is offered for the arrest of Daisy Delphira, the confidence woman who was mixed up with the recent unlawful proceedings in Howard street. She is about thirty-eight years of age, thin and worn of face and slight of figure. She dresses in good taste, and modestly, and has a well-bred air. Her hair is brown, her eyes a peculiar gray, and her complexion passable for one of her age. She is a notorious swindler and ally of crooks, and if captured this time is likely to get several years in prison."

There was nothing to tell where the article had been printed, or from what newspaper it had been clipped, but the soiled condition of the paper indicated that it was not of recent date.

Below the clipping was a single line:

"Compare this with Hermione Legrand."

Lloyd frowned. Unconsciously, as it were, he made the comparison. He was annoyed to find how well the description fitted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A GREAT SURPRISE.

The next morning Mr. Jones Laken rose at his usual hour, performed his morning ablutions with his usual fastidious care, went into the common rooms of the mission and greeted his associates with his usual pleasant meekness.

It appeared to be an auspicious opening of a day in the life of a supposedly good man.

After breakfast Mr. Laken was summoned to the private room of his superior, Rockingham Dix. He obeyed the

call, wondering if the superintendent wished him to take food to the Mulligan children or bring old Mrs. Smith to the mission.

Mr. Dix was seated in his usual place, and his face, to a casual observer, would have looked just as it always did. Jones Laken was sharp-sighted, however, and he knew that something had gone unusually wrong with his superior—something more than the every-day cares of the mission. The superintendent motioned to a chair, and the subordinate sat down meekly.

The clock on the mantel ticked several times before the silence was broken. Then Mr. Dix spoke in a low voice.

"Jones, how long have you been at this mission?"

"Eighteen years last month, sir," readily answered Jones.

"You have it exact."

"The twelfth day of the month, sir. I have taken pains to remember it, because when I came here I entered upon a life of usefulness, toil, honored service and soul reward."

Jones looked up at the ceiling as he spoke, as if he there saw the reward written out in full.

"You have been full of zeal, have you not?" pursued Mr. Dix.

"I have labored without hire, and glad that I could claim no more than the food I ate and the clothes I wore; but oh! The unspeakable satisfaction of saving the poor from suffering, of bringing bread to the hungry and succoring the widow and the orphan."

Jones spoke with all of the enthusiasm a meek man could consistently feel, and his gaze remained glued to the ceiling.

"Have you done all this because you are a truly good man?" pursued Mr. Dix.

"Far be it from me to judge myself thus, but I have taken much soulful pleasure in saving the widow and the orphan."

"Jones, do you know a locksmith named Whipple?"

Swiftly Laken's gaze left the ceiling and came down to the face of the superintendent. It was really remarkable, for it was wholly at variance with his usual species of movement. Jones looked at his superior and said nothing.

"You seem startled," added Mr. Dix.

"I, sir—I? Oh, no, sir, no!"

"You change color and expression."

"It is the shifting light from the street, sir."

"It is the shifting light of a darkened mind, Jones."

"Really, Mr. Dix, you talk in riddles."

"I will try to be plain. Jones, valuable papers have been taken from my desk, and they are in the hands of one who seeks to make misuse of them. When I first knew they had been abstracted, I was greatly puzzled to know how it had been done, for the possessor of the stolen property did not have access to my desk, and could not in any way have purloined them. Unwillingly—most unwillingly—I was forced to the conclusion that there had been a confederate in this mission."

"Is it possible, sir?" murmured Jones.

"I will ask again, do you know Whipple, the locksmith?"

"No, sir."

"Did you never see him?"

"Never, sir, to my knowledge."

"Think again, Jones."

"I do not think I ever saw him."

"Jones, be frank."

"So I am, sir. Pardon my inquisitiveness, sir, but why do you speak so strangely?"

Mr. Dix sighed, remained silent for a moment, and then went on quietly:

"When I decided that there had been treachery in this mission I looked to the lock of the desk. I found traces there of wax. I arrived at a decision at once, and that was that an impression had been taken of the lock. I went to several locksmiths, and finally found Whipple. Then the mystery was soon solved. I found that a man had come to him with an impression in wax and had a key made therefrom. The key was like that to my

desk—I learned this by showing him my own."

"But, my dear sir, I do not understand—"

"You shall, Jones; you shall understand fully. I asked him who the man was who had the key made. He replied that it was Jones Laken, my assistant."

"Oh! sir!" cried Jones, in meek protest. "Oh, oh, oh, sir!"

"Jones, why did you do it?"

There was sincere sadness in the missionary's manner, but he was dealing with the subject practically, and it was clear that he did not intend to let any other element come into the case.

"Dear sir, I did not do it!" asserted the subordinate. "Our good friend the locksmith is sadly mistaken. I rob your desk, sir? Oh! this is too dreadful!"

Softly the words purled from Laken's lips, but the situation did not seem to distress him so very much after all.

"It is dreadful; in that we are fully agreed. You have been my co-worker here for eighteen years. Now, is this the end?"

Mr. Dix's voice trembled.

"Dear sir," exclaimed Jones, meekly, "you are all wrong. I am not guilty in this; I have not meddled with your desk, and I know nothing of the locksmith and his dreadful assertions."

"Unfortunately, the proof is complete. The locksmith knew you well by sight, and he is ready to swear to your identity. I did not let my search rest there, however. I kept on, and I have learned that you secured the wax for the impression at another place, where, too, you were recognized as you were at Whipple's. In brief, Jones, the evidence is full, and not to be broken."

"Dear sir, I assure you it is all a mistake," persisted the accused.

"Why do you deny it?"

"Would you have me confess an untruth, sir?"

"I would have you lighten the burden on your soul by telling the truth, Jones."

"Just what I have done, dear sir."

"If Hermione Legrand has forced you to this, say so, and place the blame where it belongs."

"You wrong an estimable lady, sir."

Rockingham Dix sighed, and silence fell upon the two. Several seconds passed in this way, and then the superintendent resumed, in a firm voice:

"Jones, you and I will have to part. I cannot have with me one who will purloin things from my private possessions. Dishonest in one thing, he is likely to be so in all."

"Mr. Dix, I think you had better allow me to remain."

"I cannot agree with you."

"I have reasons to give."

"No reasons or excuses can excuse your misdeed—"

"Kindly pardon me. I can give the best of reasons."

"Name one."

"I am your brother-in-law!"

Jones made this statement without any sign of emotion, but it appeared to be so extraordinary to Mr. Dix that his face expressed momentary bewilderment. Then he recovered.

"Why do you say such a thing as that?" he inquired.

"Because it is true, sir. I am, perhaps, better informed as to your family connections than you are. I am Hermione's brother!"

"What?"

"I am brother to Hermione Legrand, or Effla Jackson Dix, if that is a plainer term. I am her brother, and she is your wife."

The assistant had created a commotion. Rockingham Dix was startled and dumfounded. It was bad enough to have Jones claim relationship to him after being proven a thief, but it was all the worse when the fact of his own marriage to Hermione was flaunted in his face. He would have concealed that fact as one would avoid a plague, but it seemed that one outsider, at least, knew of it. Mr. Dix was slow to recover speech.

"This is absurd!" he finally declared.

"It is true. You see I am well informed. It isn't everybody that is that. Now that I have shown you I am well informed, don't you think you had better allow me to remain at the mission?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE BAD NEWS FOR MR. DIX.

Jones Laken was not less meek than usual, but Mr. Dix would have been very blind not to see that there was an insinuation in the last words. In the lake of meekness there was an island of covert threat.

The missionary tried to regain his coolness.

"You talk very wildly, Jones—"

"One word, dear sir," requested the subordinate. "Let us be frank with each other. You know me as Jones Laken, and it is my real name. When first you knew Hermione it was as Effola Jackson. That was only a part of her name. She was christened Effola Jackson Laken; she was my sister. Our parents were good people, humble, self-sacrificing, and devoted to noble deeds. But let me not boast. Being Hermione's brother, don't you think I ought to know whereof I speak? Dear sir, I do know fully. I am your brother-in-law."

Rockingham Dix was silent, but, even in his agitation, he was scanning his companion's face, and he had to admit that appearances bore out the claim. It never had occurred to him before, but he believed now that there was a likeness between Jones and Hermione, faint, but characteristic.

Dismay followed the mental admission. It was bad enough to have Hermione to prey upon him, but now another danger, another foe, was added. It frightened him.

"It seems to me," pursued Jones, in his even way, "that it will be best for all parties for me to remain. If I stay I can help you guard your secrets, and there will be nobody to tell the captious world that you are married to Hermione. Dear sir, you do not want that known."

Mr. Dix understood the insinuation that Jones would tell the secret if he was sent away from the mission, and he found himself in the power of the knave. The assistant was a thief, yet he intended to remain at his post. More, he was going to remain, or try to ruin Rockingham Dix.

There was another pause. Presently the missionary spoke again.

"You have made a strange claim, Jones. I am not prepared to argue it with you now, or to pass judgment upon it. We will postpone the subject until we have ample leisure to take it up again. You can go for the present, Jones."

"Very well, sir. Perhaps it is better, for there is a poor old lady in the next block who is sadly in need of the necessities of life, and I wish to relieve her as soon as possible. It is very grievous, sir, how the poor suffer. Yes, it may be better for us both to defer discussing this. Consider it, Mr. Dix, and I think you will agree that it is better to let me remain at the mission. Good-morning, dear sir."

Jones went out of the office.

Rockingham Dix sprang to his feet. He was agitated and trembling. In the past he had seen nothing but the meekness of Laken's nature. Now, Jones stood revealed as a knave who intended to use all possible means to gain an end—revealed as a vulture ready to rule or ruin his superior.

For a while Mr. Dix stood inactive; then he dropped into the chair again. His convulsed face showed how deeply he felt his position, and how little he saw his way clear as to the future.

"This is terrible," he murmured.

It was nothing less. He saw himself in the power of two unscrupulous persons, and he had all the reasons in the world for wishing to be free from their clutches.

Taking the word in its usual sense, he was free from worldly pride, but he did feel deep satisfaction in having for a score of years served the mission so successfully and with such honor. It would be hard to have people know too much of him—know that he was the husband of an adventuress, the father of a child he never

had owned, and a family man generally when he had been supposed to be single.

Worse than all, exposure would doubtless bring out the fact that he had gone to Stephen Brown to give passive, if not active, support to Norma's claim upon Brown, when he knew all the while that she was not Brown's child.

"This means ruin," murmured the missionary.

He rested his head on the desk and the clock ticked away several moments before he looked up again. When he did he was calmer outwardly, but the pallor of his striking face was deep.

"My work must not be neglected" he commented, aloud.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he directed.

The matron appeared.

"A young lady to see you," she announced. "It is Miss Rayne."

Mr. Dix would rather not have seen Norma, but, since she had come, he accepted the situation without remonstrance.

"Show her in, please," he replied.

Norma came. It was not a bright face that was presented to the missionary's view; the face was serious and clouded. She stopped near the door.

"I trust I do not intrude," she spoke, hesitatingly.

"Not in the least, my child," Mr. Dix answered. "Pray be seated."

"I have come on business, sir."

"You look grave."

"I fear the business is grave, too."

"And it concerns you?"

"Vitally!"

Rockingham Dix put his personal troubles aside. He had sat down near her, and he was full of sympathy and kindness.

"Explain," he directed. "Possibly I can advise you."

"That is just why I am here. I need your advice, and I need it greatly. I am unhappy, doubtful, worried."

Mr. Dix bent forward sympathetically.

"Tell me all," he requested.

"Gladly. Let me begin at the beginning. I want to speak of Hermione Legrand. I have known her since I was a little girl, too young to analyze her position in my life, and, as a consequence, I never gave it full analysis in my maturer years."

The missionary did not know just what was coming, but it surely was nothing agreeable, and the ghost of the past began to loom up once more. He could not speak to encourage the story, but he was not kept waiting.

"I remember Hermione further back in my life than any other person. She was a prominent figure in my earliest life, as remembered by me, and appeared much as if she was a relative, not necessarily near, but somewhat so. As a foundling I lived in various places, but no matter where I lived, Hermione was sure to come later."

"She—she—. Maybe she took an interest in you," suggested Mr. Dix, in a low tone.

"She did, surely, for she showed me many signs of affection. Let me be as brief as possible. When I reached my fifteenth year she came to me, took me under her care, and I have been with her since."

"Well?" questioned Mr. Dix, absently.

"Is it well?" abruptly inquired Norma.

"Eh?" cried the missionary, starting.

"Mr. Dix, is Hermione a worthy woman?"

"My child, why do you ask?"

"I want your opinion. Is she a worthy woman?"

"You should know better than I."

"No. I have been young; I am not now old. You have seen an eventful life, and dealt with all kinds of people. You can judge human nature. Is Hermione a worthy woman?"

"You confound me with such an inquiry. Do you doubt it?"

"Since you do not reply directly, I will tell you all. This morning I had callers when Hermione was out. They were James Brown and a man whom he introduced as a detective from Boston."

"And what was the errand?"

"I was informed that Hermione was what they termed a confidence woman—an ally of swindlers and thieves, and I don't know what else."

"Did they prove that?"

"I don't know, and that is why I came to you now. I don't like to think evil of Hermione, but they brought up some odd things."

"What?"

They showed me numerous newspaper clippings, taken, they claimed, from Boston papers, and referring in part to things alleged to have happened in other cities, chiefly west of here. If the clippings were what they purported to be, Hermione must be a dreadful woman!" and Norma's lips quivered.

"You have known her a good while. Isn't your knowledge such that you can readily guess whether they are right or not?" asked Mr. Dix.

"That is just what worries me," pathetically replied the girl.

"Do you doubt her?"

"What I refer to is this—my own knowledge corroborates the statements in part."

Rockingham Dix drew a deep breath.

"How?"

"The clippings place her at certain definite dates in certain places, and under names known to me."

"Names known to you?"

"Ever since I have known her, Hermione has gone from one city to another, and she has sometimes changed her name for a while. She explained this then by saying that she had a name for private life, and did not wish it to be associated with business. She went to business, you see."

"What business?"

"She told me she was employed by brokers to get clients to invest in securities—and I always believed her!" piteously added Norma.

"Do you doubt it now?"

"The clippings gave the same names Hermione used, and the same dates, and say that she was busy as a confidence woman under those very names."

"You know she used them?"

"Yes."

"And you cannot prove that she was honorably employed?"

"No. I know only what she told me. She never allowed me to go to the 'office,' as she called it."

Mr. Dix was silent. If Norma felt uncertainty, he felt none. He knew Hermione of old, and was prepared to believe she had occupied herself as a confidence woman. Had she not proved to be one a year after he married her?

Rockingham Dix felt the perspiration stealing out over his forehead, and he was woefully dismayed and demoralized. He was menaced by shame—worse, Norma was similarly menaced.

"I don't know what to think of Hermione," repeated the girl, in a tremulous voice. "I want to think well of her, but I am terribly afraid of the future. I don't know what to do. Oh! how much I need a mother now—how much I need a father!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ANOTHER CRISIS COMES.

The missionary started and looked at his companion in fresh dismay. Of all words she could have chosen none other that would have touched him so.

"How much I need a father!"

The outcry of her stricken heart seemed to ring in his ears long after her sad, gentle voice had died away. She did need a father—Rockingham Dix knew that, yet her father sat there, unknown to her, and unable to say the words of tenderness and love that hovered on his lips.

She was deeply grieved to lose faith in Hermione. What would she say to find a father who occupied a position of trust, confidence and charity, and yet had allowed her to claim as a father a man who he knew was not related to her in any way?

"I have been alone all my life," Norma went on. "It is nothing new to me; but

Hermione has been my one friend. Must I lose her now? What am I to do? I lack the years to decide. Why can't I have the advice of a father?"

Rockingham Dix suddenly leaned forward again.

"My child," he replied, his voice sinking low, yet sounding unspeakably kind to her, "do not grieve, do not feel lonely, do not regard yourself as friendless. You feel the need of a father. I would not allow myself to say that I will be that to you, for I regard myself as unworthy of such high honor; yet I can, I will be your protector. Look to me for a father's love."

The reply thrilled Norma. She could not have explained why it was, but the words went to her very heart. Deep emotions welled up and almost unnerved her. She felt a profound happiness in the assurance given her, but she was not calm. She was shaken by feelings she could not understand, and the voice that thrilled her seemed almost more than human.

If she was moved deeply, so was her companion. The parental love was aroused more than ever in Rockingham Dix's heart, and he longed to clasp her in his arms. She seemed good and noble; he believed she was all of that. Yes; and she was his child—the daughter he never had held in his arms.

He gave her assurances of his protection, and in the same breath he mutely prayed that she might have a greater Protector.

"You are very kind," answered Norma, when she could command her voice. "I have no words to express the appreciation I feel of such assurances, but I feel the strongest gratitude. Oh! why are not you my father?"

"I?" gasped Mr. Dix.

"Yes."

"I am not worthy."

"You are grand and good."

"You do not know me."

"I thank Providence that I do know you, and I know what you are to me."

"You little know."

"It is very like you to decry your own abilities," replied Norma, understanding the last speech as little as she did the rest of the matter, "but others know your worth. I know, and I am thankful that I have been brought into contact with you. Really, though, Mr. Dix, we are forgetting the object of my visit. What am I to do about this report concerning Hermione?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Must I leave her?"

"Would you do that?"

"I don't know. If the reports are true—"

"You say there is no proof that they are."

"But my own knowledge of her confirms a part of the newspaper article, even if it does not point to crime."

Mr. Dix considered, but it did not take him long to arrive at a decision in one respect. There must be delay. Hermione must not be angered while she had such powers of mischief. When the Brown matter was settled she could be dealt with properly—but not while she had such a hold over both Norma and Mr. Dix himself.

"Miss Rayne, I advise prudence."

"How?"

"Haste is never wise in intricate cases."

"Maybe not."

"Make sure of your position. Take time to act. Miss Legrand has been your companion and protector; it seems that, if she has failings, hostility to you is not one of them. Such being the case it is your duty to her to get proof before acting adversely to her wishes. Delay a little, Miss Norma; do not say a word to her until this has been investigated."

The visitor drew a sigh of relief.

"I hoped you would say that."

"Why?"

"I like Hermione. She has been like a relative—almost like a mother to me."

Mr. Dix winced. He had been compelled to notice more than once how near Norma was unconsciously hitting to the truth, but he did not like the phase of the case which referred to Hermione.

Delay meant a postponement of trouble

to them all, and, as he saw Norma so willing to adopt the plan, he grew more at ease. He leaned back in his chair and settled into the strong, kindly, passionless missionary, outwardly.

He talked for some time in his peculiar way, and Norma lingered to receive the encouragement of his presence and speech. She finally aroused, left the clippings with him and departed from the mission.

"How good and noble he is," was her thought, as she passed along the street.

As she neared the Pinckney house she nerved herself for the new struggle. She had decided on delay, so she must be wise, prudent and natural, and not allow Hermione to suspect what had occurred.

She entered the house. Quietude brooded there, indicating that Zacheus Pinckney and Lloyd were out; so she went at once to the private room she and Hermione occupied in common.

"I wonder if Hermione is there?" she wondered, pausing a moment in the hall.

She opened the chamber door; Hermione was there.

The elder woman was standing near the window, and she turned at the sound of the door. Norma entered and tried to assume an air of innocent gaiety.

"Back again!" she exclaimed, lightly.

There was no responsive smile on Hermione's face. Instead, seriousness brooded there almost to the extent of a frown.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Out for a walk."

"Is that all?"

Norma had not expected such questioning, and especially not with such coldness, and she grew confused and replied in desperate haste, without regard to veracity or anything but desire to reassure Hermione.

"Yes."

Her face was scanned by eyes that seemed to devour her every secret, and she flushed under the regard.

"Sit down, Norma. I want to ask you a question. Have you been to see Rockingham Dix?"

"What a singular question! Why do you ask?"

"You have been there."

"I did not say so."

"You said it plainly with your reddened cheeks, downcast eyes and general air of guilt. What did he advise?"

"Oh!"

The girl almost gasped the word. She began to look upon Hermione as one possessed of supernatural powers, and she grew frightened.

"What was his advice?" repeated the questioner.

"Now, Hermione, I think this is not right," protested Norma. "Is my word to go for nothing? Didn't I say that?"

"You did tell a falsehood, but it will avail you nothing. Since you are so reluctant to speak out, I will come to the point. Do you see this paper?"

A printed slip was flashed before Norma's eyes, and she felt her heart sink. It was one of the newspaper clippings.

"Why—what—where did you get that?" she faltered.

"I found it on the floor where you dropped it. A word of advice to you—never try underhand work until you are capable of keeping fast hold on dangerous ammunition. Your fingers must be clumsy; you dropped this right where I was sure to see it. Again, I ask, what did Dix advise? Are you going to leave me?"

CHAPTER XXX.

A SECRET TOLD.

Norma scarcely heard the last question. Her one prominent subject of thought was of the fact that she had allowed the newspaper clipping to get into Hermione's possession. She had examined all of the clippings in that room, but she supposed she had kept them together and carried the whole lot to Rockingham Dix.

Now it was clear that she had accidentally dropped one on the floor, and it had fallen into Hermione's hands.

To Norma this seemed an overwhelming calamity, and the elder woman's cunning in suspecting that she had been to

Mr. Dix sufficed to unnerve the girl wholly.

Hermione did not get any reply to her last question, so she presently repeated it sharply:

"Are you going to leave me?"

Norma started out of her abstracted mood.

"Leave you?" she echoed.

"Yes, leave me."

"Why should I do that?"

"Foolish girl! Why do you fence with me? You are not in any way fitted for the task. A cowboy can ride a horse, but he would be poorly equipped to measure swords with a French duelist. You have the soft skin and unwrinkled cheeks of youth, but you haven't the head to deal with one of my experience. Norma, don't be a fool!"

"I don't like your way of talking to me!" cried the girl, with a sudden flash of spirit.

"Dear me. Don't you?"

"No."

"That doesn't count. I am your superior—your mistress."

"Am I a servant?"

"You are not so useful as that," replied Hermione, who appeared set on tantalizing her companion.

"At least," retorted Norma, warmly, "I am not a confidence woman."

"Ah, ah!" breathed Hermione, gently.

"Read the paper you hold. It tells things I did not know before. It seems you have been hoodwinking me all my life, but the secret is out now. You are a swindler, a confidence woman—I know not what else."

"My sweet Norma," cried the elder woman, with a triumphant laugh, "you are a mandolin and I the player. I thought I could irritate you into being outspoken. I have tried; I have succeeded. Shallow child! So, so! You have these papers; you have read them; you have judged the woman who has been your friend; you have been to Dix with your tale of woe and crime. What did he say to my shallow lady?"

Norma's cheeks had been pale for many a day, but they now flushed deeply. She did not like her companion's manner, and as she thought of all the facts she grew too indignant to be calm.

"I am able to form my own opinions," she declared, warmly, "and I have formed one now. I am not inclined to keep the company of a professional swindler. Hermione, you and I must part."

"When?"

"Now."

"For how long?"

"Forever!"

"Forever—now!" murmured Hermione, unmoved.

"I will go immediately!" cried Norma, springing to her feet.

"Wait! You shall not be detained by force, but I have a word to say to you, child. It may benefit you to hear it."

The speaker had dropped her tantalizing mauler. Her expression grew serious, her utterance almost solemn. There was that about it all which brought Norma to a stop. Hermione never had appeared so impressive before. The girl felt a sort of chill, as if something menaced her—she could not tell what.

"When you came in," pursued Hermione, "you tried to avoid all the frankness that seemed to me so necessary. I determined to make you speak out, and I did it by irritating you. I know your position now—you wish to leave me."

"Well, Hermione, it is like this—"

"There is a reason why you should not go."

"Is there?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Perhaps a question was expected, but none came. Seeing this, Hermione resumed.

"You call me a swindler, confidence woman and the like. That means a typical adventuress. I am not going to argue the point, or seek to defend myself. I am too indifferent to deny anything. Instead of indulging in foolish talk I am going to give you a plain business reason why you should not leave me."

"I am going to leave, nevertheless," persisted Norma.

"You are?"

"Yes."

Hermione caught the girl's arm in a rough hold. Her eyes suddenly blazed and she excitedly cried:

"You will not go!—you will not degrade me, for the disgrace will fall as heavily on you as on me. Do you know why? It is because I am your mother!"

The secret was out, and it came passionately and vehemently, hurled at Norma as if it were a missile. It came, but it was too strange to be believed. The girl simply opened her eyes the wider and replied:

"The device is transparent; I do not believe you!"

"No? Seek for the proof in the past. What have I been to you? My money has been yours; your interests have been mine. I have kept you with me, protected you, loved you—in my way. Is this nothing? Blind girl, do you not see the truth? I tell you I am sincere—ignoble though I am, I am your mother!"

It was a swift, strong presentment of facts, and Norma did not fail to be impressed. The facts were driven home, and her disbelief fled. She faltered; she changed color; she looked strangely at her companion.

"You, my mother?" she gasped.

"Yes."

"But how—why—I do not understand," Norma faltered.

"I do not expect that you understand. I have held my secret through many years, and now I comprehend it better than you do. There is no reason why you should understand—your one duty is to believe."

"But why have I never known of it?" asked the girl, piteously.

"I thought you just as well off without the knowledge."

"Didn't you dare to tell me?"

"I dared do anything," declared Hermione, with a wave of her hand.

"If this is true, who is my father?"

Then came a lull. The discovery of the clipping by Hermione was a singularly severe shock to one as hardened as Hermione, for she really loved Norma as much as her peculiar nature allowed, and she had thought only of stopping desertion on Norma's part. Now, the question took her entirely by surprise. Since she claimed the girl, what became of the claim upon Stephen Brown? And, to use Norma's own words, Who was her father?

She was looking at her companion with dim eyes and trembling lips. Yes, Hermione was silent. It was an ominous pause.

"You frighten me!" added Norma, unsteadily. "You tell me much, but you make more necessary. If I believe you in part, what else am I to hear? Oh! Hermione, what does this mean? Answer me, or I shall lose my senses! Who was your husband?—who was my father?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ANOTHER STRUGGLE.

Hermione was dismayed by these pointed questions, but she had been too long a daughter of fortune to fail long to find an explanation. She found words now and met the emergency.

"Child," she returned, in a subdued voice, "do not press the point now. It has seemed best for you to be kept in the dark, since I could best work for your good if it was so, but you shall know all presently."

"You do not answer me," persisted the girl.

"I did answer."

"Not directly. Who was my father?"

"I have told you that."

"No. Not now. Was it Stephen Brown?—but you never have claimed to be his wife. You say his wife is dead. What am I to make of this? I can make nothing. Hermione, you frighten me; you suggest terrible possibilities—I know not what. Tell me who I am—what I am!"

She had grown almost hysterical, and

Hermione now showed her strength of character.

"I have not felt compelled to be perfectly frank with Brown," she explained. "I am working for your good, not for his. I seek justice for you. Now, Norma, don't be foolish. I am not going to tell all this to you. You are not wise and experienced. If I give you the facts you are sure to spoil all, just because you lack wisdom. You must be content to wait a little, and then you shall have full information. Until then be easy. Be prudent and sensible; be my own sweet Norma. Come, come, child, trust your best friend!"

Hers was not a tender nature, nor a convincing way, but the influence she had long exercised over Norma had not been wholly lost. The latter rebelled inwardly against yielding, but yield she did. The arguments were kept up, and she was talked into obedience. Hermione had her way—a postponement of decisive action was agreed upon—and then Hermione approached another phase of the case.

She asked where the clipping was obtained, and Norma told of the visit of James Brown and the Boston detective.

The adventuress heard with some dismay, but it only incited her to fresh action. Her secret thought was that she must go at once to the Browns, and she was not long in starting. Soothing Norma all she could, she made an excuse and left the house.

Direct to the Brown residence she went, and she was lucky enough to find the two brothers in. Her request for an interview was not refused, and she was soon in their presence.

She did not go in as a suppliant—she went with a frown on her brow and other signs of hostility. They regarded her with severity—she disregarded it and plunged into her subject.

"The Evil One always finds work for his own to do!" was her abrupt beginning.

"Then you must be busy!" sneered James.

"Don't steal my thunder, Brown; it is the lowest form of retort," quickly replied Hermione. "Why can't you keep out of mischief?"

"What do you mean?"

"How about the newspaper clippings?"

"Oh! So you have seen them?"

"Yes."

"Then you see we have you cornered and beaten."

"I see nothing of the sort."

"Oh! Don't you? Well, then, you are blind."

"What do you intend to do next?"

"Stop your fiendish work!" cried the detective.

"How?"

"By arresting you, if need be. You are a confidence woman, and the ally of thieves, swindlers and—"

"And you will have me arrested?"

"Yes."

"Do you not fear my return blow?"

"No. Being able to prove what you are, we will trust to luck and righteousness to beat you out. It is fight from this out; we shall have you arrested."

Hermione turned to Stephen Brown.

"Is this your idea, also?"

"It is," replied Stephen.

"Then we need waste no more words. To put it briefly, you will back out; you won't have me arrested."

"Why not?"

"You have a wife?"

"Yes."

"What about your first wife, Lora Addington?"

"I deny that she ever was my wife, but even if it were true, what of it? You admit that she is dead—"

"Out of pity for you I did say that; out of pity for you I lied. Lora Addington lives."

"What?"

"She lives."

"Where?"

"Here."

"What do you mean?"

"I am Lora Addington, I am your wife." Fiercely the assertion was made, and

Hermione drew up her spare form with an air that did not lack impressiveness. She created momentary consternation, for they were troubled men, but the mood soon passed. James Brown's face took on a sneer.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "You carry this too far!"

"Absurd!" added Stephen.

"The speared fish writhes, but the bark holds him fast!" retorted Hermione.

"You doubt me, but proof can be had—" "Woman!" snapped James, viciously, "have done with this. You were ridiculous enough before, but now you add positive idiocy. You imputed a marriage to Stephen that never occurred. That was bad enough, but now you ask him to believe that an entire stranger is his wife. Wouldn't he know a person who had been his wife?"

The adventuress turned upon Stephen Brown.

"Was not Lora Addington plump of form and gifted with considerable flesh?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Wasn't she young, and gifted with all things that go to make youth pleasant?"

"Yes."

"Can you expect a woman of my age to look like one of twenty? I have seen the years pass, and my youth has gone with them. I have been ill, harassed, troubled. Can flesh remain when the body and the mind alike reap a harvest from it? I am not young, and I am not as plump as I was twenty years ago. Do you expect me to look as I did then?"

It was a logical argument, and Stephen began to open his eyes wider and look earnestly. He studied Hermione keenly.

"That's right," she commented, "use your vision well. Do you see nothing of the Addington features?"

The Police Special began to be worried; there seemed to be candor in her manner, and he noticed that Stephen was agitated. James moved restlessly. He wanted to speak, to break in on this lull that might prove dangerous; but, somehow, his ready speech had deserted him.

"How is it?" asked Hermione. "Is there any Addington feature there?"

"By thunder!" muttered Stephen, "you do look like Lora—"

James leaped to his feet excitedly.

"Don't admit it!" he shouted.

Hermione laughed triumphantly.

"Too late! He has admitted it!"

"It is only a resemblance."

"I am Lora Addington; I am Stephen Brown's wife."

"Proof!" shouted James.

"You shall have all you want. I am not so big a fool as to make claims without any evidence to support them. I can give you evidence to your heart's content, and both individual and documentary."

"Let us see it."

"I will."

"Now!"

"Do you take me for a fool? Am I going to pass over valuable things to you and have you steal them? Not I!"

"Steal them?"

"So I said."

"Do you know you are talking with honorable men?"

"No, I don't know anything of the sort. You may be honorable enough, but I have to go by the evidence, and that does not look your way. I shall give you nothing in private, but if you want to see my evidence I will submit it to a disinterested party of honest men, and let them say as to its reliability."

"No. We object to the publicity."

"Either the evidence will be examined that way or you will take me at my word. I am not going to pass papers over to you and have them stolen."

"Stolen! Madam, we object—"

"Put the objection on file. Now, I am Lora Addington and I can prove it, and I want you to be more careful. You have brought your Boston detective into the case with a great flourish of trumpets, but you may as well smuggle him back to Beacon Hill."

"He can prove that you are a confidence woman."

"He will not prove it!" retorted Hermione.

"Sure?"

"Yes. Listen to me! I live; I am Stephen Brown's wife. Shall I prove it? If I do, what of the present Mrs. Stephen Brown? What will be her standing?"

"Forbear!" exclaimed Stephen.

"Let the forbearance come from you. I do not ask you to acknowledge me as your wife. I renounce all claim to that position, and the present Mrs. Brown can wear her honors for all of me; I am not mean. But, James Brown, there must be no arrests made."

The case was plainly put now, and they knew what to expect. They remained silent in the face of the threat, and the seconds wore on. The Police Special was the most puzzled of the two. Stephen had denied marrying Lora Addington, yet his manner had not always been candid. James was not sure of his brother, and his own force of character was thus lost.

Hermione broke the silence.

"Is it peace or war?" she demanded.

"I want a little time," weakly replied Stephen.

"Will you keep hands off from both me and Norma?"

"Yes."

"You can have the respite—but don't abuse it. Beware how you go crooked!—It will mean ruin to you!"

Hermione moved toward the door; she was ready to go. A few more inconsequential words were said; then she left the house.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MAN WAS HIRED.

Lloyd Pinckney did not succeed in hastening his discoveries as much as he desired, and as he found no trace of Tom Ross he decided to pay another visit to the tenement where Tom had formerly lived. Poor Mary Ross slept in Greenwood, but if Tom took an over-supply of whisky aboard it seemed that he was likely to return to his old haunts.

Ira Pond did not report any such thing, but, as boys do not always hear everything unless by chance, Lloyd thought it prudent to see his old acquaintances, the women who had watched with Mary.

He went to the tenement and soon found Mrs. Pond. This lady did not possess so much good humor as her son, but she was mindful of the fact that she might die herself sometime, and was not disposed to be uncivil to a rich young man who took upon himself the expense of burying poor people.

"No," she replied, to Lloyd's inquiry, "Tom ain't been around."

"Are you sure none of the other women have seen him?"

"Right sure. Ef Mrs. Soper or Mrs. Meigs had seen him they would hev' told me. We don't like Tom; he was a brute to poor Mary. Most men is brutes, anyhow; but he was worse than the run o' them. See?"

"Quite plainly. Where do you think Tom is?"

"Drunk."

"Yes. But where?"

"In some dive."

"Worthless Tom."

"Yes; but he's a man," reminded Mrs. Pond, philosophically.

Her store of information did not suffice to reveal anything more, but just as Lloyd was about to seek the other women, one of them, Mrs. Soper, dropped into the room. She was glad to see the cheery-faced young man who had been kind to Mary Ross, and she said so.

"It's all your doin's that Mary is a sleepin' of so sweet now," she added, presently.

"No thanks to Tom Ross," replied Lloyd.

"Tom is a brute."

"Where do you suppose Tom is, Mrs. Soper?" inquired Lloyd.

"Dunno—dunno. Tom could brace up when he wanted ter, an' they do be sayin' he got a job."

"I hadn't heard of that."

"Neither had I until Mrs. Martin told me; but she knew of it."

"When and how did he get this job?"

"Just before he went away, but it's little I kin tell ye about it. Ef you want more you'll hev' ter ask Mrs. Martin."

Mrs. Martin was new to Lloyd, but when he learned she was one of the women of the house, he asked to see her, and she was duly hunted up and brought to the room. She was a woman who appeared to be fighting a hopeless battle with hard luck, but her face was good and her manner more refined than the average of the tenants of the old rookery. It was explained to her that Lloyd wanted to know what she could tell of Tom Ross.

"Yes, he got a job and went away," she responded.

"How do you know?"

"I heard the bargain made."

"What was the job?"

"I don't know."

"Where was it?"

"Right here in New York, I guess, though I don't know."

"Tell me all you know about it."

"All I know is that I heard Tom an' the other feller talkin' about it. They was near my door, an' they talked so I heard them plain. Says the other feller ter Tom, 'I've got a job fer you.' Says Tom, 'Wot fer a job is it?' Then off I went about my work, but though I missed a good deal, I finally got around there again, an' I heerd more. Says Tom, 'It's a risky job.' Says the other feller, 'You are a man o' sand an' you don't mind the danger. I pay hard cash, an' you ain't in no danger o' gettin' pulled, as all will be on the dead quiet.'

"What more?" demanded Lloyd.

"I went ter put my bread in the oven, an' all I heard after that was some minutes later, when I heard the bargain closed. Tom said he would take the job an' risk the danger. Maybe it was workin' a powder-mill."

Lloyd's mind did not connect the "job" with any powder-mill.

"I am sorry you did not know the other man—the one who gave the job to Tom," he commented, thoughtfully.

"Oh, but I did; I knew the other feller by sight."

"Ha! you did. Who was he?"

"His name is Gus Wayland."

It was a surprise, and the information was most welcome. The high-roller's connection with the case never had been in doubt, but that he was the instigator of the whole business was an entirely new theory to Lloyd.

"Is that Gus Wayland in business?" he inquired, innocently.

"He's a crook!" broke in Mrs. Soper.

"Sure."

"Well, I've heeard so; I can't prove it."

"Maybe he thought of going out of dishonest work into honest business," added Lloyd. "Yes, he may have been going to start a powder-mill, Mrs. Martin."

"Powder-mill with a bullet in front of it!" snapped Mrs. Pond, at a venture.

"That would be more likely."

Lloyd was elated, but he kept cool and asked more questions. The result was, there were several more things recalled by Mrs. Martin, and she was able to be exact as to dates. When the mine was fully worked Lloyd did not have any doubt that Gus Wayland had hired Tom to do some sort of "job" just before the tragedy at the Pinckney house.

Nothing more could be learned in the house, so Lloyd left, and walked down the street. He went in a mood of deep thought, and the result of it all was that he set out to learn more of Wayland's movements just before the tragedy.

He was not successful in this, and he finally decided to go home. He started, weary and irritated, but clinging to hope in spite of it.

He was proceeding along the street at a good pace, when he finally exhibited a sudden change of expression. He stopped short on the sidewalk and stood like a statue.

Suddenly Lloyd aroused. He slapped his hand on his thigh and exclaimed:

"By Jove! I'll try it!"

He hailed a cab and hurried in side.

"To Mulberry street, Police Headquarters!" he ordered.

The cab rattled away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS PRISONER.

In due time the cab landed Lloyd at Police Headquarters. He entered the building, and, passing through various corridors, made his way to the office where a grim guardian was posted on duty between the Superintendent and the public.

Lloyd asked for the Superintendent, but did not succeed in securing an audience with him readily.

"Has the man who was found with the cab which contained the dead man been identified?" asked the caller.

"Not yet."

"Can I see him?"

"Why do you want to see him?"

"I am in hopes I can identify him."

"Why do you think that?"

Lloyd had struck a solid wall of cold reserve and investigation, but, as he had nothing to conceal, he was frank enough, so that, at last, his object was accomplished. Having seen the Superintendent, he was conducted to the cell of the mysterious prisoner with whom Ira Pond had ridden through the streets on a memorable occasion.

The mysterious unknown was seated on his bed, sullenly staring at the floor, and he did not look up when Lloyd entered. The latter paused and surveyed him. The sight was not especially fascinating, for he was not an attractive-looking man, but Lloyd was not inclined to be over-satiduous.

"Good-morning," he spoke, presently.

The prisoner raised his gaze slowly.

"Well," he muttered, "am I to hev' some more of it?"

"Some more of what?"

"Questioning."

"Have you been questioned much?"

"Wal, you ought ter know."

"I am not of the police force."

"Oh, ain't you? Then what bug hev' you in yer head?"

"I have come for a sociable call, Mr. Ross!"

Lloyd sprang the bomb suddenly, but his closest scrutiny failed to produce signs to his liking. The prisoner did not start or change expression.

"Ef you want ter be sociable," was the retort, "you kin go an' hobnob with them cops. I ain't got no use fer you."

"Can't you distinguish between me and them? They do not know who you are. I know that you are Thomas Ross."

"I dunno what you are talking about, but you can blaze away, ef you want ter."

"I have just come from your home, Mr. Ross."

"Say, wot's all this you're givin' of me? Why do you call me Ross, or Foss, or Hoss, or whatever it is?"

"Hush! There may be listeners," cautioned Lloyd. "As I said before, I have come from your home, and I want to give you the news. In the first place, your wife is buried."

"Well, I should hope so; she died five years ago."

"I refer to your wife who died a few days ago—Mary Ross, of the tenement."

"Boss, this may amuse you, but it don't me. You fellers all talk like lunatics, an' I'm nigh tired o' nonsense. However, jest shoot away, an' you may hit a house yet."

The visitor was staggered. He had expected the man to deny vehemently and quickly that he was Tom Ross, but the prisoner did not appear to care if he was regarded as Tom. This did not seem to fit into Lloyd's theories.

"Let me ask you once more," pursued the visitor, rallying, "not to mix me up with the police. I have come from your home—"

"Oh! don't—you give me a pain!" growled the prisoner.

"Why?"

"It's jest like this. I've been boardin' here fer some days, an' every few hours somebody trots in an' says ter me, 'Ain't you Smith?' or 'Ain't you Jones?' or 'Ain't you Jenkins?' or 'Ain't you somebody'

"Say, I am dead tired of it; I be, by thunder!"

"This case is different," replied Lloyd, staggered anew. "I know you are Tom Ross—"

"That's a lie!" bluntly retorted the prisoner. "You don't know et, fer I ain't him."

"You deny that you are Tom Ross?"

"Say, do you need a club ter git an idee inter yer head? Thunder an' lightnin'! you fellers give me a pain. If it will oblige you I'll answer you, though. No, I ain't Ross!"

Sullenly, yet without a visible sign of trepidation, the reply was made, and Lloyd's hopes sank. He had come there with the strongest hopes of finding the missing citizen of the tenement, but he could not hold that faith in the face of such outward indifference on the prisoner's part.

He made an effort to carry his point by persistence.

"It is useless for you to deny it. I know you are Tom Ross."

"All right, call it anything you like. Call me Ross. The name is as good as any; I don't care a rap."

The speaker looked as if he meant it, and his failure to persist in denials did not appear to be a good sign.

Lloyd held to his purpose for some time, but, as he gained nothing, it suddenly occurred to him that the police had been engaged in the same business with the same want of success, and that he was not likely to move the man's obstinacy, do what he might. Accordingly, he left the cell, had a brief interview with the officers, and then returned to his cab, entered, and was driven away.

An hour later he reappeared on the scene accompanied by Ira Pond. Lloyd looked more encouraged, while Ira was simply full of zeal and assurance.

"Jest trot out yer prisoner," he remarked, "an' I'll tell ye in a jiff whether he's who or ain't who. I've known Tom Ross fer five years, an' seen him every day, unless he was too drunk to get around. Shall I know ef it's him? Wal, I should chirrup! Tom has kicked me so many times that the prints of his nails is grafted inter my tender flesh indelibly. Know him? Why, I'd as soon forget my own face, an' there ain't nothin' like my face except a Third avenue snow-sweeper."

On the strength of this assertion the boy was allowed to accompany Lloyd to the cell. He went, and they were duly ushered in.

The prisoner had not changed his position, as far as Lloyd could see, and he was not more ready to look up than before. Lloyd watched another person; he scanned Ira's visage closely, and he saw a look of recognition flash over the boy's face.

One moment Ira delayed, and then he walked briskly forward and heartily slapped the prisoner on the shoulder.

"Hullo, Tom, old sport!" he cried.

The prisoner raised his head, and this time he was not so slow about doing it. He and Ira looked at each other.

"Got inter trouble, ain't ye, Tommy?" added the boy. "Always knew ye would. You kicked me so many times that judgment was sure ter come ter you. Got it in the neck, ain't ye? What fer a game is this you are up against now, anyhow?"

Ira was bubbling over with high spirits, but he did not receive a warm greeting in return. The prisoner swallowed once or twice—there surely was something the matter with him—and then his lips unclosed.

"Say, what is eatin' ye?" he inquired, calmly.

"Hey? Is that the way ter speak ter a neighbor, Tommy?"

"Neighbor!" echoed the prisoner.

"I said so."

"I don't know you."

"No?"

"Never saw ye before in my life."

"Tom Ross, you're a liar!" asserted Ira, strongly, but not dismayed by the denial. "You an' me has lived in old Tumble-down Tenement too many years fer yer bluff ter go. You hev' bluffed the police, but

it won't do with me. I've known ye fer years. Think I don't know ye now?"

"Oh, well, call it as you wish. I never saw you before, an' I don't know you, an' my name ain't Tom Ross, but all this don't matter. Let me be Tom Ross, ef you want it so; I don't care. Call me anything you please."

There was stolid indifference in his reply, and the watching officers outside the cell did not know whether to place faith in his cool denial or the boy visitor's equally emphatic recognition.

Ira did not weaken.

"Come, Tommy, don't be foolish," he urged.

"Bah!" growled Tom.

"That's more like ye, Tommy. You always was a crabbed critter. Say, do ye want ter kick me, jest in memory of old times?"

"Bah!"

With this reply the prisoner turned his head away. More, he was not to be decoyed or coaxed into saying more, and the visitors finally left the cell.

"Well?" questioned an officer.

"Gents," replied Ira, "that feller is Tom Ross; that's dead sure!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WITNESS IS FOUND.

Half an hour later Lloyd and Ira were again on the sidewalk. The former turned suddenly upon his companion.

"Ira, was that Tom Ross?"

"Sure! Didn't you hear me tell the perleee so?"

"I did, but are you sure of it?"

"Yes, sirree, I be."

"Then why didn't you recognize him when you had him as a passenger on the box of the coach, that night?"

"Easy told. I always had 'seen Tom with rags on, an' with his hair an' whiskers lookin' like a hedge-row. When he rode with me he had been shaved, got a hair-cut, an' a lay-out o' new clothes. Then, furder, it was night then, an' the light was not good where him an' me rode on the box."

"But you knew him immediately now, you claim?"

"Good light, ye see."

"Still, he was an old acquaintance, and why didn't you know him on the box, even if he was changed by dress, and so on?"

"Pinky, do you think I was dead easy in mind, that night, ridin' around with that other passenger inside the coach? No, I was confused an' scared—I was, by jing! But this is Tom Ross, now you bet yer last red. It's true as guns!"

Ira was emphatic, and, as Lloyd wanted to believe him, he did not find it so very hard to do so—so he told himself, but he could not shake off the fear that the recent positive recognition might have been due to the fact that Ira had expected to see Tom Ross when he went into the cell.

He hoped the recognition was complete and reliable, but he was not positive of it.

They talked of the matter for a while, and then Lloyd spoke of leaving his companion.

"Where be you goin', Pinky?" asked Ira.

"Up by the North River."

"Let me amble along, too. Say, you're goin' ter refuse! Don't do that, old man. Ain't I your right bower?"

Ira spoke anxiously, and Lloyd was not disposed to reject the company of one who had been so valuable. He gave his consent, and they went together.

The object of the present journey had been the outcome of a talk with Norma, and Lloyd hoped to gain something of value by means of it. With this errand and the case of the mysterious prisoner on his hands, he was quite full of business, just then, but events were shaping themselves through his investigation, and he felt well repaid for his trouble.

In due time he and Ira approached the river, and then Lloyd went to an old, low, weather-beaten house—one of the few of the early residences still standing—and summoned the tenant by means of a rap at the door.

"Excuse me, madam," he then spoke, "but, if I may so far intrude on your time, I would like to inquire for certain people who once lived near here, if you are an old resident."

"I was born and brought up right here," was the ready answer, "and I and my husband are about all of the early residents who still remain."

"And you knew the people of twenty years ago well, I dare say?"

"All of them. New York was not thickly settled around here then, and we knew everybody among our neighbors. Who do you want to ask about, sir?"

The woman's curiosity was aroused, and she seemed eager to be tested as to her knowledge.

"A family named Addington," replied Lloyd.

"The Addingtons? Why, bless you, I knew them very well. Old Josh Addington worked with my father along the river, and I associated with Josh's daughter, Lora, a good bit."

"That is good. Josh is dead, I suppose?"

"Killed in a steamer blow-up—boiler burst—puff!—good-by to Josh!"

"His wife?"

"Died before him."

"Then I shall have to rely upon finding the girl, Lora—"

The woman shook her head.

"I'm afraid it will be hard work."

"Why?"

"I don't know what became of Lora. She married, lived a while around here after that, and then went away. She may be dead, too, for all I know."

"What became of her husband?"

"Maybe he's in New York; he was, once."

"Have you his name?"

"I ought to know it; I saw them married."

"Oh! did you?"

"Sure! His name was Stephen Brown, and he worked for a contractor up this way. When this part of the North River began to get settled in earnest, gangs came up here to work. Stephen Brown was with one of the gangs. He met Lora Addington and married her."

"You saw it?"

"Yes."

"Was it a happy marriage?"

The woman lifted up her apron, smoothed out a wrinkle and then surveyed the result critically. Finally she answered, slowly:

"Maybe not."

"How was that?"

"Since you are a friend of the Addingtons I feel a bit reluctant to tell you, but it was like this: Stephen Brown was drunk when he was married!"

"Possible?" cried Lloyd.

"I'm afraid so. You see, Lora fell dead in love with him, but, from what happened later, I doubt ef he was very much in love with her. One evening she invited several of us girls in to see her married. We did see it. Now, we were young and thoughtless, but we commented on the way Stephen Brown acted, and after some exchange of opinions, we agreed he had been drinking very heavily. We didn't think much of that then, but it came back forcibly to us later. Yes, sir; for it was soon whispered among the neighbors that there wasn't peace and love between the young couple. To be frank, the rumor was that Mr. Brown was inclined to repudiate the marriage, alleging that he was so under the influence of liquor when it took place that he did not know what he was doing, and that he never would have dreamed of marrying Lora if he had been sober."

"That is surprising."

"Possibly it was true. Lora wasn't just perfect, anyhow, if I do say it. It may be, as rumor had it, that he claimed she decoyed him into the marriage when he was in that condition because she was bound to get him, anyhow."

"You say you do not know whether Lora is living?"

"I don't know."

"Is there anybody who is likely to know?"

"Really, I can't say. The building up of this part of the city has swept the old residents away, and I know as little of them as I do of Lora. If found they might be able to tell more than I can, and then, again, they might not."

"Was there a child by the marriage?" asked Lloyd, trying to be outwardly unconcerned, now he had reached the all-important question.

"I don't know. Stephen Brown gave up his job and Lora drifted away. I don't know whether they lived together or not, nor whether children were born to them."

The lady had told all she knew, but Lloyd lingered and asked many more questions before he gave up. When he went away it was with a sense of disappointment, but he felt that he had made one important gain, if no more.

"I can now prove that Brown was married to Lora Addington," he thought, "and if he refuses to acknowledge the marriage it will not be hard to confound him. I am not sure, however, that I am pleased to know that Norma is of such stock, or a child of a marriage that started off so peculiarly."

Ira had been watching his friend closely.

"Well, how goes it, Pinky?" he inquired.

"I don't know."

"Isn't there more detective work we kin do?"

"What?"

"Dunno, by jing! but I'd sorter like ter keep at it. I want to make a sensation."

"Maybe there will be one!"

"Good! Wade in, old man, an' le's make the fur fly."

Ira was full of the effervescence of youth, but it was a very serious affair to Lloyd. He did not see how he was to settle matters so Norma would have a parentage worth claiming, and that was what he was most interested in—Norma's welfare outweighed all else in his mind.

"One thing is sure," he murmured, "the Browns had better stop their talk about arresting her. Unless they act with decency toward her I will publish to the whole world the fact that Stephen married Lora Addington. It will make more than one heart ache, but the brothers must let her alone or suffer the consequences."

"Now, then, boss," broke in Ira, "let's git more witnesses ter Police Headquarters ter identify Tom Ross!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DETECTIVE AT WORK.

Night fell over New York. The sky was veiled and fog hung about the streets as if to envelop them in a misty robe. More than usual darkness came in the train of this condition of affairs, and more than one inhabitant was led to remark upon the unpleasantsness of the occasion.

Rockingham Dix was walking rapidly along. As much work as he had to do for himself, and as much of trouble as he had to confront, he did not neglect the affairs of the mission. He was returning from a hovel where he had seen a painful episode of life among the poor, but where his kindly care had brought relief, and he was cheered and comforted by it all.

He had been thinking deeply of it, but he aroused as he entered a well-known block and fixed his gaze on a certain house.

"A light burns in her room," he murmured. "Norma is there."

It was the Pinckney residence. The missionary allowed his gaze to wander to other parts of the house, and he was impressed by the fact that, except for the hall light, no other room showed any break in darkness.

"It is as if they were all out but her," he added, presently.

Two men ascended the stoop.

"Visitors?" wondered Mr. Dix. "What? It is James Brown and another man. What are they going to do there? I don't like that. If the family are out they are dangerous visitors for Norma to receive."

He had stopped short, and his gaze followed every movement with real concern.

He saw the men admitted by a servant, and his trepidation increased. He knew not what would occur behind the door that had shut out his view.

"I must see to this!" he suddenly decided.

He walked openly across the street and approached the door. He intended to ring and gain admittance just as openly, but as he ascended the stoop the door was unclosed suddenly and the servant was revealed. She had opened it to rearrange the mat, which had been shut under the door, but the insignificant event was much to Mr. Dix. He knew the girl and she knew him.

"Mary," he spoke, "who is in?"

"Only Miss Rayne, sir," she answered.

"Whom do those men wish to see?"

"Miss Rayne. She has just gone into the parlor where they are."

"Mary, is there an annex to the parlor?"

"There's the back parlor, sir, with the folding doors."

"Will you allow me to go secretly to the back parlor and remain there a while?"

This servant had such a high opinion of the honored missionary that she would not have demurred if he had asked even more. She readily agreed now. Mr. Dix was escorted to the second room and left alone. He moved the sliding doors a little, and could see and overhear all. Norma was there, with James Brown and the second man.

"Life is too short to waste words," the Police Special was saying, with an offensive utterance. "The long and short of it is, we are here to arrest you, and we can delay no longer about it."

"I want to see Mr. Pinckney," replied Norma.

She was pale of face and tremulous of voice, but Brown was in ugly mood and he gave no heed to her dismay and agitation.

"He can come to you in your cell, if he wishes," was the reply. "but I won't hang around here to wait for him."

"Mr. Brown, you do very wrong to arrest me."

"Do I?"

"You do. My friends have talked with you—"

"Far too much. They could talk a gas-meter out of sight, and then say nothing. You may thank yourself that you have had so long a respite. The plain facts are that we have decided not to dally with you longer—"

"Sir, I have friends who will visit their wrath on you if you persist in this work."

"My dear young woman, your friends have played a good game of bluff and rather dazed us, but it won't go longer. Come what will, we are going to proceed to the extreme. We defy your friends; let them see what they can do. Go and get ready."

"Not until Mr. Pinckney comes—"

Brown leaped to his feet.

"Here is the warrant!" he cried, angrily, waving a paper, "and I have the whole track clear. You will get ready at once, or I'll carry you out, by Judas! Come!"

He seized her arm and dragged her toward the door. His brute strength was more than she could resist, and she first burst into tears and then agreed to obey. A few more words passed, and then she announced that she would go and prepare for the street.

"Do you need to go up-stairs?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"I'll go part of the way."

"It is not necessary."

"From your point of view, no; from mine, yes. I am not going to have you skip out, my lady. I'll go to the upper hall."

Norma looked at him in indignant surprise, but Brown was firm. Without another word she turned and went up-stairs and the detective followed. He did not intend to act with positive meanness, and when she entered her room and closed the door he lingered in the hall. He dropped his head in meditation.

"The fight is fully on," he muttered.

"It may prove one of disaster, but the house of Brown is desperate. We shall sink unless we act boldly—we will act just that way and trust to fortune."

A moment more his thoughts ran thus; then he had a disagreeable surprise. An arm was thrown around his neck; he was hustled to one side; a giant's grasp seemed to be upon him, and he was flung into a small closet. The key clicked in the lock and Brown was fastened in.

Norma opened her door and came out. To her amazement, Mr. Dix stood there.

"Come with me," he directed, calmly.

"Where is Mr. Brown?" she asked, wonderingly.

Thump! thump! thump!

There was a racket in the closet, and the detective was to be heard floundering about and crying out faintly.

"I think," answered the missionary, with deliberate utterance, "that Mr. Brown may be occupied elsewhere. Come!"

Norma's color changed from red to white and back to red. She heard the sounds in the closet, and faintly suspected what had occurred.

"Where?" she asked, tremulously.

"For a walk. Come!"

Rockingham Dix laid a firm, steady hand upon her arm and drew her along with him. She was too much excited to reason clearly, but she was not inclined to disobey that command. She kept by his side, and they descended the stairs. It was to be expected that Brown's ally would notice them, but the parlor door was closed and he saw nothing.

They passed out of the house, closing the door softly after them, and proceeded toward the mission. Even when on the sidewalk Norma heard the captive detective floundering around up-stairs, but her companion did not seem at all excited.

Without the least visible quickening of his steps, Mr. Dix led the way. He appeared to have nothing to say, and Norma was too much frightened to break in upon the silence. Thus they walked without a word being spoken.

When the mission was reached, Mr. Dix escorted her in. The matron was in the office.

"Miss Rayne will stop with us to-night," announced the missionary, calmly. "Make the best possible arrangements for her, please."

Then he led the girl into the inner office. He turned his serene, strong face toward her without signs of emotion.

"Allow me to take your wraps," he continued. "The night is a bit chilly, but there is a fire yonder. You will be comfortable here; you will be safe."

"Oh! Mr. Dix!"

Up to this time Norma had been possessed of a measure of calmness. She had been frightened by the rapidly-occurring events after Brown invaded the house, but the singular coolness of her champion had exercised a sort of mesmerism over her that kept her emotions in check; but, as his manner changed, as he turned from outwardly indifference and spoke with such marked kindness, she lost her composure.

The exclamation was followed by a flood of tears.

"Norma, Norma!" the missionary murmured, gently. "My dear child, do not grieve thus. You are safe here."

"You are so good, so good!" she sobbed.

"At least I will defend you."

"You have done it, nobly, grandly! Where should I have been but for you? That horrible man came; he commanded me to go with him; he was harsh and peremptory; he would have dragged me to prison. Oh! Mr. Dix, I have done nothing to be thus degraded and persecuted. Why will he persist in it? It is such a shame, such a horror to me!"

She shivered and sobbed afresh, and the missionary bent over her and spoke again in his magnetic voice.

"Be calm, be calm!" he murmured.

"The danger is over; I will not suffer harm to come to you. They do not know you are here, and this will be your refuge. Within the limits of the mission you are safe."

"But will they not do you harm for helping me?"

"Maybe they will not learn who did it."

"But, if they do? Oh, they may arrest you, too, for helping me!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DESPERATE INTRUDER.

Rockingham Dix received the suggestion with calmness.

"I hardly think I am in danger of arrest," he answered. "It is true that I have been engaged in rescuing a prisoner from an officer, but if James Brown wants any trouble with me over the affair, I will meet him openly. Do not fear for me, child. I acted deliberately, and I have my reward in having you here. Here you shall stay; the mission shall be your home and your refuge."

"May Heaven bless you!"

His unswerving kindness touched Norma deeply, and she impulsively caught his hand, pressed a kiss upon it and then dropped her head on her own hand.

"This is protection little known to me," she murmured; "it is happiness, rest, joy!"

Mr. Dix gently stroked her hair as he bent over the lowered head.

"All we have is at your call, whether you are left alone or still hunted by Brown," he assured her.

"You are kind! You are noble!" whispered Norma, tremulously. "Oh, but the relief of it!—the change to peace and safety! I am happy, now!"

The white hand of the missionary moved regularly across her hair, and his face was full of tenderness.

"Little Althea, Little Althea!" he murmured, softly.

It was the name by which Rockingham Dix's infant daughter had been christened, years before, and he liked to apply it to her now. It was not a common name, and she failed to catch more than the accent of pity and tenderness, so he was not called upon to explain why he applied so strange a name to her, and he went on caressing her hair and murmuring the name.

"Little Althea, Little Althea!"

Presently Norma aroused. She was too happy to spend her time in such a way with bowed head and silent tongue. She looked up, and Mr. Dix discreetly drew back.

"It seems familiar to be in the mission," she remarked, smiling faintly.

"It was not in this part that you were before?"

"No; I was then with the other children."

She paused, hesitated for a moment and then added, slowly:

"To-morrow I want to look again at the books, if you will allow it. I can't reconcile all the facts in my case. According to my claim on Stephen Brown I am twenty-two years old, but the mission books, as I read them before, do not make me over twenty, and my recollections of the mission are more in accordance with the latter than the former age. Yet, I must be twenty-two if I am Mr. Brown's daughter."

It was one of the weak spots in Hermione's claim upon Stephen, but Mr. Dix did not think it needed to be met then. He passed it by lightly, and then, foreseeing that other questions might follow, headed all off by speaking on another subject.

"The evening is not young, and perhaps I had better let you retire now. You will have the room off of this office. My own room is yonder, by way of the door on the other side of the safe, but I shall not occupy it until later. The matron and the rest of us are all within call. You see you will be within reach of aid at all times—that is, after we retire. While we are up and officially engaged you will have no neighbor here, but you will not mind that if you have company near by night."

"Of course not."

"I will leave you. You can remain in this room, or go to your private quarters."

Then Mr. Dix went out. Norma believed he was to busy himself about the

building. Really, he intended to walk over to the vicinity where he had rescued her and see what was being done there.

"James Brown is all aroused now," was his thought, "and he will not remain in idleness. Despite my assurance to the girl, I very much fear we shall soon see the detective here at the mission. It behooves me to see what he is about."

While he thus went abroad, Norma, after lingering awhile in the office, retired to her allotted room. The place was spotlessly clean, and she sank into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"Rest, peace, happiness!" she murmured.

Minutes passed. She had much to think about, and a good part of the subject-matter was not pleasant. Now that Mr. Dix was gone the dark spots showed more strongly. He had rescued her from Brown, but she knew enough of law to fear that this would be but a temporary relief to her, while it was liable to get him into trouble. All this she considered in the silence of her room, but her musings were finally interrupted.

There was a sound in the outer room, the office she had lately left. She wondered if it was Mr. Dix or the matron, but the possibility that it was the missionary led her to wish to make sure. She wanted to be assured that nothing had been seen of James Brown about the premises.

She opened the door and walked into the office.

There she had a disagreeable surprise. Somebody was in the office, but it was not Mr. Dix or the matron. Instead, she saw a young man, who was bending close to the safe and examining the lock.

"Oh!" impulsively exclaimed Norma.

The man leaped up quickly and confronted her.

It was Gus Wayland.

The surprise was mutual, and for a moment neither had the power of speech or motion. Then the high-roller recovered and gained her side with a few long steps.

"Be still!" he exclaimed. "Do not say a word. Dare to sound an alarm and it will go hard with you."

"What are you doing here?" faltered Norma.

"I am here on business!" replied Gus, promptly. "I may as well be frank with you. Luck has gone all against me, but I am not done up yet. I am going to skip out of New York, but I am not going empty-handed; I am going to have money in my pocket. Look at yonder safe! Do you know the secret of the combination?"

"No," mechanically returned the girl.

"Then I shall have to pick the lock."

"You do not mean—"

"I have turned burglar; I am going to rob the safe. You see I am frank, but it is because—"

"You shall not do it! I will give the alarm—"

Wayland drew a revolver.

"You will be still or suffer the consequences. I will not be frustrated in this. Be still or I will shoot!"

Norma made a quick movement and gained position between him and the safe.

"You will not touch it!" she cried. "It is the mission safe—it shall not be broken open!"

Gus glared fiercely upon her.

"Fool! Do you mean to oppose your will to mine?" he cried.

"I shall defend the mission safe."

"Out of the way!" ordered the high-roller. "I am going to have the money that safe contains!"

"You shall not touch it!" retorted Norma. "You may have turned robber, but I am here to defend what you seek. I will not move away!"

Wayland was pale, but determined, stirred to action by desperate conditions.

"For the last time," cried the high-roller, "get out of my way. The safe shall be opened; you resist at your peril. Get away from here!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.
THE CRISIS

"Stop! We have something to say about this."

The voice sounded behind Wayland, and he wheeled quickly. By the outer door o the office stood a man, armed as the would-be robber was, and with his face full of energy and resolution. He advanced hurriedly, and then another man passed the door and followed in his steps.

It was Rockingham Dix.

Gus Wayland looked for a moment; then a bitter smile crossed his face.

"Lost!" he exclaimed. "I have played my last card and missed the boodle."

Calmly he advanced to the missionary, held out his revolver, and added:

"Accept this, with my thanks. I shall not need it where I am going. I have lost the cast of the card."

It was the last word he spoke on that occasion. They questioned him, but he would say nothing. It was clear that, driven to the wall, he had risked all, just as he said, and that he had given up hope. He had gained nothing, and as Mr. Dix was not ready to deal decisively with the case, he was taken to the strongest room of the mission and left there for the night, under guard. There was little danger that he would worry Norma further.

Then the mission quieted down once more, and all tried to get a measure of sleep.

Morning dawned without any change in the situation. Wayland remained quiet and philosophical in his extemporaneous prison. The regular family of the mission had breakfast as usual, with Norma as a guest. The girl was worried and nervous, but a trip later, on Mr. Dix's part, failed to develop any signs of active hostilities against them. He found nothing of James Brown.

The first half of the forenoon passed, and then came the dreaded calamity.

James Brown appeared at the mission, accompanied by his brother and a second officer. They asked for Mr. Dix, and he received them in his private office. He was perfectly calm, outwardly, but the detective was ugly and aggressive.

"That was a fine trick you played on me last night, Dix," he remarked, "but it will avail you nothing. I am here to arrest Miss Norma Rayne."

The missionary looked only at Stephen Brown.

"It seems to me," he replied, "that you cannot afford to push the case. Suppose I try to fix up a truce, or permanent cessation of hostilities? I will seek to make Miss Rayne withdraw all claims, and you shall refrain from molesting her—"

"Too late!" exclaimed James Brown.

"Why?"

"We are no longer at the mercy of the gang that has hounded us. We have proof of all we wish to prove. We admit that Stephen was married to Lora Addington, but we may say it was done while he was under the influence of liquor. More: he never lived with Lora. More: Lora died years ago, long before Stephen married his present wife."

"And what of Norma?" asked the missionary.

"She can look elsewhere for a father. We can bring witnesses to swear that Lora never had a child."

"Then why need you molest Norma?"

"Because she killed Ezra Pinckney, or was party to it—"

"Can you prove that?"

"Well, the proof may be lacking, but there is enough to warrant an arrest, and I am an officer of the law."

Rockingham Dix saw sincerity in all that James said, and was very much afraid that the Special could prove all he alleged as to the Brown-Addington case. Mr. Dix drew a long breath and prepared for a struggle to save Norma.

Before more could be said, however, the door opened, and three persons walked in, unannounced. They were Lloyd Pinckney, Ira Pond, and Hermione Legrand. Lloyd spoke quickly.

"Mr. Dix, you will please pardon our abrupt coming, but we learned of Brown's presence here, and—"

"And we want to see Brown!" cried Hermione. "You wretches! Do you still wish to hound an innocent girl? If so, you will find that I can fight, too. It is

proven that she is Stephen Brown's child, and—"

"Not so fast," interposed the detective, hotly. "Woman, your lies have all been exploded. You are not Lora Addington, as you have claimed. Lora died many years ago, and she died childless. The girl Norma has no claim on my brother. More, you are now fully known to me. It was not all fiction when you claimed Addington blood, for such was once your name. You were born Mary Addington, and you were sister to Lora—that's who you are!"

A swift wave of dismay went over the adventuress's face, but she rallied strongly to meet the crisis.

"If it will do you any good I will admit that I am not Lora," she returned, promptly. "That much was a bluff with me. But that does not change the main fact—Norma is Stephen's child and Lora's."

"We deny it!" shouted James.

"So do I?"

It was a quiet, meek voice by the door, and Jones Laken came in, with steps light and air as humble and placid as ever.

"Justice," he resumed, "demands that I tell—"

Hermione sprang to his side.

"Be still!" she hissed. "Don't dare to say a word here!"

"It may be rude," murmured Jones, mildly, "but I must say something for justice sake—"

"Be still!" repeated Hermione, vehemently.

James Brown moved to her side.

"Woman," he sternly exclaimed, "you shall not dominate all here. Speak out, Jones Laken. What do you know?"

"Merely this, gentlemen," gently responded Jones. "I, too, was born an Addington, and Lora—who is dead—and Mary—whom you see before you—were my sisters."

"Aha!" cried James, triumphantly.

"Hermione is right in saying she knows the parentage of the girl Norma, for—"

The missionary, pale and worried, moved to the front.

"Jones," he spoke, unsteadily, "the place for you to tell your story is before an appointed tribunal, not here. Kindly refrain from saying more now."

Jones suddenly threw off the mask of his long years of hypocrisy. His usually meek face became full of venom and fury, and his eyes blazed as he raised his voice to a shout, adding:

"Hermione is the wife of Rockingham Dix, and Norma is their child!"

The secret was out; even the headlong Special was stilled and silenced. He had nothing to say. Jones stood in the midst of the dumfounded party, his eyes gleaming strangely.

"It is my turn now," he added, in the same loud voice. "Many long years I have labored in the mission, hiding my real nature under a mask, and pretending to be an angel when I wanted to be a man of blood, but kept in harness by the fact that I had a good position. What was my reward? I worked my hardest, but nobody gave me praise. It was all Dix, Dix—Rockingham Dix! He was a wonder; I was nothing! He would not die to make room for me, and I have hated him for it. Now, I have of late been degraded by him, and I will not endure it. I will speak out. Hermione is his wife; Norma is their child!"

Mr. Dix went to his chair and sat down. His face was pitiful in its anguish. He knew he could not disprove what Jones had stated, and he wasted no breath in vain denials.

"By Jove!" cried James Brown, finding voice, "this is the discovery of the year! I think we are fully on top now, Stephen!"

"This is terrible," murmured Lloyd. "Speak, somebody, and deny it!"

"Denials don't come!" laughed James. "Aha! I think I can see a clear path now, and I'll have mercy on nobody."

Stephen Brown had been looking fixedly at Rockingham Dix, and the expression of the contractor's face was not so bitter as that of an enemy should have been.

"I have something to say here," he now put in. "I am not disposed to be harsh

on anybody who can prove that he, or she, has had as much difficulty and worry out of this as I have. I'm a blunt man, but I'm not a brute, I hope. I say that I'll give everybody a chance before I make trouble for them."

"But the demands of justice—"

Thus began James, excitedly; but Stephen cut him short:

"Law is not the only instrument of justice. Keep still, James; I have something to do with this case."

"But if these people killed Ezra Pinckney—"

Again the door opened. Two men entered quietly. First came John Jacks, the junk-dealer, grim and calm.

There was a general start all around, and joy flashed over Lloyd's face. Nobody could find speech at first, but all gazed at the junk-dealer's companion. Amazement, bewilderment, and other deep emotions were expressed all around, and when Rockingham Dix finally found his voice his sudden exclamation was like a bombshell.

"Ezra Pinckney!" he ejaculated.

"Alive!" gasped the detective, in confusion. "Ezra Pinckney alive!"

Lloyd rushed to meet the man thus referred to.

"Father!" he cried, joyfully.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CLEARING AWAY THE DEBRIS.

A scene of confusion followed. Ezra Pinckney was there, alive but pale, as if from recent illness, and nobody could claim perfect composure. Father and son occupied their time with affectionate greetings, but when they had spoken for a while the elder Pinckney came to the front.

"I owe an explanation to all here," he announced, "but I cannot give one in full. About all I can say is that when my house was set on fire I was caught in the flames. When I awoke the fire was far along. I went to the window; I looked out; I saw the people gathered there, and knew I was in vital danger. I turned away from the window and tried to get down the stairs. That is the last I remember in many days, but I can explain the break. I fell down the smoke-darkened stairs, struck on my head and sustained a fracture. I should have died there but for the advent of John Jacks, who found me, took me out of the burning house, and to his own shop, and carried me to the loft of his premises. There I have been for many days, unconscious, but cared for and doctored by John Jacks. As soon as I regained my senses, I planned to get out into the world again, and, now I have some strength, I have come. Why Mr. Jacks kept the fact secret that I was alive, and not burned up in the house, he can, perhaps, tell."

John Jacks rubbed his nose meditatively.

"Neighbor of mine; glad to do all I could for him," he then answered.

It was the only explanation that was ever gained from the eccentric junk-dealer, and to this day his object in keeping Mr. Pinckney shut up in his loft can be accounted for only through John's eccentricity, though the fact that he well cared for Pinckney was past denial.

"I am not the most surprised person here," remarked Lloyd, presently, "for a wild hope has been in my mind for some hours. I will show you why."

He went to the window and knocked, and the result was that two men speedily entered. One was an officer; the other was Bob Blunt, the vagabond. Bob looked unhappy, and hitched at his ragged trousers as if he expected to run through them, somehow.

"Robert," spoke Lloyd, "tell us what you know."

"I ain't goin' ter git my neck stretched," replied Bob, wagging his head wisely. "I've known all along that the body identified as Ezra Pinckney's wasn't his'n. Et was like this: Two coves, Jakey Flynn an' Tom Ross, was hired ter go ter Pinckney's house an' steal some things. They broke in, an' they was bur-

glarin' in a lively way when they made a mistake."

"They run onter each other in the dark, after bein' separated, an' each thought the other was an inmate o' the house. Tommy was quick with his knife, an' he give et ter Jakey. He killed him off-hand; he did, shore. This scared Tommy, an' he jest set the house on fire ter hide the deed. Yes, sree, an' when the fire was over Jakey was so burned up that he was mistook fer Ezra Pinckney. See?"

"And Tom Ross?"

"He's in jail as a mysterious unknown. I didn't know all this first off, but I do now."

"Who hired Jake and Tom Ross to go on their burglarious trip?"

Bob suddenly leveled his finger at Hermione and tersely replied:

"Her!"

"Ah-h-h!" breathed Hermione, with a start.

"Understand this!" added Lloyd, quickly. "We do not claim that Hermione planned to kill, or even to rob anybody of money. It was like this: She was our guest—my father's guest—and he found evidence that she was a confidence woman and adventuress. He told her she would have to leave the house. She denied the accusation; he showed her the papers proving her guilt. Is that right, father?"

"Yes," replied Ezra Pinckney.

"Then Hermione went to an acquaintance, one Gus Wayland, and asked him to furnish men to enter the house and steal the papers. He brought Tom Ross and Jake into the game. They entered the house, and the tragedy followed. It has been said that two women were seen to enter the house by the rear door, but this has been proved an error; it was to another house they went, and they were wholly unconnected with the case."

James Brown turned his gaze upon Hermione with an unpleasant smile.

"I guess our volatile lady is in for trouble," he remarked.

The adventuress flashed a defiant glance upon him, but, just then, a pair of arms was thrown around her neck and Norma exclaimed:

"Even in your hour of downfall I am your friend!"

"That does not head off the law," added James.

"Wait!" interrupted Stephen Brown. "None of us want too much notoriety, and I say there shall be mercy shown to whoever can possibly receive it. Gentlemen, most of us are not needed here. Let us all go out except those who have actual business here."

"That means me fer one," remarked Ira Pond, "an' I'll set the example by goin'. Come on, small fishes; the show is about over!"

Ira went, and others followed, until only Mr. Dix, Mr. Pinckney, Lloyd, Norma and Hermione remained. Jones Laken would have lingered, but the detective who had Bob Blunt in charge touched Jones on the shoulder and whispered to him, and the mission-worker went too.

Ezra Pinckney was far from strong, and he took a chair and sat with his head resting on his hand. Lloyd stood by his side, but looked at Rockingham Dix. The latter was silent for a considerable while, but he suddenly roused.

He looked at Hermione seriously.

"Effola," he finally spoke, "you have led me into a misdemeanor."

"I suppose I know what you mean," replied the adventuress, sighing.

"First of all, let us here acknowledge our daughter, Norma."

"She is our daughter," agreed Hermione.

"I heard it said before," exclaimed Norma, "but I cannot believe it." She shifted her gaze to Mr. Dix and added, wonderingly: "Your child? Yours?"

"Mine!" cried Mr. Dix, his pale face lighting up with joy; "my little Althea!"

"But it is so strange, so unspeakably strange; and you went to Stephen Brown and said I was his child."

"No, no!" cried the missionary. "I never said that. I went there with you

when you presented your claim. Remember that I never asserted to anybody that you were his child. I did act a lie, but I told none. Let me explain how it was. Effola, or Hermione, as you know her, had been my wife, and you were our child. When, after long believing you dead, I learned that you were alive, Hermione was trying to prove you to be Stephen Brown's child."

"Money, money!" muttered Hermione. "I wanted the Brown fortune, if Norma did not."

"I knew," added Mr. Dix, "that the claim was not just, and I declared I would expose the fraud. Hermione promptly told me that I would not, but that, on the contrary, I would aid to make you seem Mr. Brown's child. What was her hold on me? I will tell you. She asserted that it was she who married Stephen Brown, long years ago, and that she was his wife when she married me, two years later. Bear in mind that I knew Norma to be my child, and there you have the secret of Hermione's hold on me."

The missionary paused briefly, but went on, hurriedly:

"I shall not seek to conceal my brief connection with the plot to give Norma a father in the person of Mr. Brown. Judge me by my motive. I knew Norma was Hermione's child. If Hermione was Brown's wife, it was better for Norma that she should seem to have Brown for a father than to have no father who dared own her, and I dared not if Hermione was Brown's wife! I may have done wrong to lend countenance to the scheme, but I wanted my child to be happy, and—let me tell the whole, hard as it bears on Hermione—I labored under a threat from Hermione that she would tell the story to the world unless I helped her as she wished."

"It is Hermione, all Hermione!" cried the adventuress, bitterly.

"Effola," gravely replied Mr. Dix, "have I done you any wrong?"

"None!"

"Have I told the strictest truth?"

"Yes."

"I am very sorry for you—"

"Stop!" interrupted the woman. "I do not doubt you. Rockingham Dix, for your heart is as tender as a woman's should be, but words are wasted on me. I am a soldier of fortune; I know how to take defeat. I am defeated now. Very soon, unless I am arrested, I shall go from New York forever. I go alone; I leave Norma with her father. I have loved the girl, and I have cared for her well, in my way, but she now has a better friend. I leave her with Rockingham Dix, and neither of them will ever see me more. I go to fight the world. I feel no weakness; I trust I shall show none. There is a sore spot in my heart, for I love Norma—little Althea! But, never mind. Let her remain with her father—remain where she will see only the good side of life. I pray that father and child may be happy. I go alone—"

"Wait, Effola!" tremulously interrupted Mr. Dix. "I will find a happy home for you where you can see Norma now and then—"

"No! My life is too dark, too bitter for her to see me more. I will not contaminate her. I go, and I go alone. For the rest, look to the future. What it will bring nobody knows; it may bring a better ending to life than life ever is. Remain, you; I go alone!"

Settlement of the various cases followed. Rockingham Dix and Stephen Brown had a long talk, and, as a result, the contractor refused to prosecute anybody, or to make war on anybody. James Brown lost his case wholly, and, in consequence, did not speak to his brother for a year.

Hermione lingered only one day. Then she went away, and from that day has not been seen or heard from by those who knew her once. Her whereabouts are unknown.

Jones Laken tried to go also, but he was rash enough to seek to rob a rich man's house before leaving. He was detected, arrested, sent to Sing Sing on a long sentence, and is still there.

Gus Wayland, the high-roller, Bob Blunt,

and Tom Ross, were also sent to the prison by the river, and only Bob is likely to see freedom soon.

Ira Pond was given a lift in life commensurate with his valuable services in Lloyd's employ.

Ezra Pinckney built a new house and started life anew. It will be no surprise to learn that he has with him his son Lloyd and his daughter Norma—who has been known as Althea ever since she married Lloyd.

Rockingham Dix continued at the mission, and it was to be noticed that, while his zeal in his work did not flag, he was happier in mood than in the old days. He had reason to be, for Althea had brought sunshine, hope and happiness to his daily duties. So there is only what is good to record of them all, and the brightest hours of their lives are with them now.

THE END.

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